READER

READER

10th Anniversary Rewrite

Daughter of Time, Book 1

EREC STEBBINS

Only one thing is impossible for God: to find any sense in any copyright law on the planet.—Mark Twain

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Reader: 10th Anniversary Edition. Copyright © 2025 Erec Stebbins, erecstebbins-books.com

ISBN 978-1-942360-63-6

To the extent possible under law, the author has dedicated this work to the public domain by waiving all of their rights to the work worldwide under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights, to the extent allowed by law.

This work is published under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

You can copy, modify, distribute, and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission.

No attribution is required, but voluntary credit to Erec Stebbins and the original work is appreciated.

For more information, see:

https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0

To SG

A Note on This Edition

It has now been ten years since the original publication of my *Daughter of Time* trilogy. Of all my writings, this series is the most important to me in nearly every aspect of a novel that might matter: plot, ideas, themes, characters, and writing. Unlike my thrillers, which were written strongly to match what I understood of the expectations of the genre, I had allowed myself a lot more creative license with *Reader*, *Writer*, and *Maker* (especially *Maker*).

In this edition, I have undertaken a rewrite based on approaches I developed with my thrillers over the years. This approach tightens text considerably, and would often trim 10% of a book's words without altering a scene. Producing text that was leaner and more driving seemed to fit the thriller genre's expectations, but I was hesitant to apply it to the *Daughter of Time* series as I felt I might lose some of that wilder creativity by taking this editing machete to the project.

In the end, I created a hybrid method where I went through the many procedural steps in "trimming the fat" I'd used previously, but in the process of rewriting also allowed myself to let my

imagination run more freely. I was able to remove twenty-five thousand words from the series (10%) and even add an additional chapter.

I hope readers enjoy this new edition, whether encountering the story for the first time or returning to it after many years for a fresh perspective.

Erec Stebbins

December, 2025

Time is the fire in which we burn.
—Delmore Schwartz

Prologue

Who sees the future? I am conscious of being only an individual struggling weakly against the stream of time.

Ludwig Boltzmann

Demons defiled my dream at dusk.

Misted light saturated the afternoon. A breeze caressed the grass of our backyard and sprinkled the strong smells of the plowed earth. Squinting into the sun's glare, I skipped across the lawn to the edge of our cornfields. My short legs stumbled, my fingers stretched toward a tall shadow in the brilliance before me. I was five years old.

The sun shimmered as my father's frame refracted its radiance, and the shadow shifted to his familiar form. I leapt into his outstretched arms, squealing. His soiled hands gripped and swung me, his auburn hair dancing. I giggled as I stared into his gray eyes.

He tossed me skyward. The ground receded, half grass-green, half rich red from the overturned soil. The cyan surrounded me in

a strange stasis as my upward momentum eased. Gravity grasped my stomach and yanked me back to Earth and his arms, a thrill of adrenaline like fire in my limbs. Several times he launched me, and I went farther and laughed harder each time. Higher and higher I soared. The blue turned black surrounding a sphere painted with continents and seas. Bright stars lanced through a thinning atmosphere.

For a moment, I floated, thrown so high I flirted with the field of force tethering me to our motherworld. The stars tugged, beckoning, luring me with a frosted intensity. My naive senses recoiled. Giddiness sharpened to anxiety. Something was wrong. Something unclean stalked the diamond-pricked blackness. Something searching...*for me*.

Earth reasserted her will. Air rushed and howled in my ears. I darted through clouds and frothing air currents. To the edge of my vision, a patchwork of squares and rectangles replaced the colorful sphere. These expanded and resolved into the familiar patterns of my family's farm. Twirling downward, I watched my father from above, waiting with arms overhead and hands held high. Was I going too fast, falling without aid from the edges of space? Could he possibly slow my momentum, catch me before I plunged like some fiery meteor into the dirt?

But he did. With an embrace, he cradled me in his arms, extra momentum diverted into a dizzying rotation. I spun in circles with bubbling giggles. He wound to a stop and set me on the ground, my head a wreck and woozy, my legs wobbly.

He beamed down at me, tousled my hair, and chuckled. "The sky is yours, Ambra Dawn. The world won't hold you."

He filled his phrases with love, yet they clotted in my heart, an ominous echo of what was to come. Mirroring my deep fears, his face clouded. He focused behind me, rising from a stoop and scowling toward our house. My eyes followed him upward, and I turned to track his gaze.

My mother planted her feet outside the back door that exited our kitchen. Her strawberry hair produced a waterfall in the wind. She stood still. *Terribly still*. Her face was stone-frozen, anxiety and fear etched in every line. She raised one arm at ninety degrees to her body, an arrow indicating the front of the house. She pointed, unmoving, a directional sign demanding obedience.

My awareness rushed forward, braking beside her face. For one sharp breath, I paused. I followed her arm from the bright light of the day into the dim house, and out again by the front door to the falling dusk.

Three black cars with tinted windows thrust headlight beams in my face. A troop of hulking men in suits spewed from them with hateful faces. My child's body morphed to a preteen of eleven years while they brushed me aside. The shadows herded my parents into the house. I trailed behind, ignored and unwanted. A poisonous foreboding sickened me as I stumbled inside. The men's dark clothes chilled like the emptiness of space encountered moments before.

Moments? Or was it years? *Separations of time. The way of dreams.* For me, the way of life.

They invaded our kitchen. The smaller men engaged my parents. The larger ones stalked like suspicious soldiers about the house and out by their cars.

My mother's words shivered with anxiety, shrill notes in her Irish brogue scraping the stillness of the room. "I don't understand. We don't know who you are. We can't just be handin' her over to you!"

"Mrs. Dawn," rasped the smallest man. The voice raised bumps on my skin. "We are a singular governmental division. We develop unique technologies for the military. One of these is a special laser. Army doctors have shown it kills cancer cells. We can promise a full cure, without major side effects. No one else can. But this is top-secret technology. We cannot share this with you or

anyone else—not even your doctors. Her treatment must remain secret."

He took off his dark glasses, his face angled toward my parents and away from me. "A doctor in the Omaha unit is a friend of mine. He was direct with me—she won't live past next year with current treatments. We are your last hope."

Tears dotted my mother's cheeks.

My father set his jaw. "Now, you look here," he growled. "You've got no cause to be speaking like that and upsetting my wife. This is all irregular. Government or not, it ain't my way to trust shadows. If what you're saying's true, we'll work with you. But we got to know more."

"But, Frank, you *heard* him," my mom began.

"Never you mind what he said. I don't like this talk. This is our Ambra." He glared at the man. "She's our world."

I dropped the wooden toy. A hand-carved mini-globe with the continents embossed on the surface. It struck the hard floor with a crack and rolled out of the kitchen to the living room. My heart constricted. *The Earth. I didn't want to lose it!*

The small man across from my mother turned.

I screamed.

I couldn't help it. At eleven, it was overwhelming. That demon face—I had seen it before. *In other dreams.* Dreams churning inside dreams.

His face was a splinter of a forgotten vision. It rushed back through me like nails in my veins. Flashes of future memories whipped my mind—pain, fear, loneliness, and horror. Each shard a facet of the mask worn by this fiend from hell, grinning back at me.

I ran. I jumped from my seat and dashed like I'd never in my life. Behind me, the voices of my parents faded. Instead, the harsh barks of his soldiers blasted like gunshots.

"Get her!"

Horrible screams. *My parents?* I couldn't stop running. A predator pursued unseen in the void behind. Its breath stank. Its fangs glinted, nearing, gaining ground. Claws extended to grapple my back and legs.

I sprinted and my chest pounded, ready to burst. I raced over the manicured green of our backyard and into the thick forest of corn. The stalks slapped my face, arms, and across my neck. I wheezed like some dying thing.

Where was I going? I didn't know. *Away.* I had to get away.

"On the other side of the cornfields!" something shouted in my mind.

Safety! Through the fields, to the road, find a car, someone to help, protect me from pursuing monsters. *Please.* I was close! My panting whistled like a windstorm.

A bright light flashed. A sharp pain. On my back, I gasped for air. A dark shape towered and eclipsed the moon. Warm liquid spurted from my nose as I choked. A mountain pressed me to the earth.

The figure loomed, shrouding all light. In the shadow of his body, I saw that demon face again, smirking downward, mocking me with laughter.

"We've hunted you a long time, little girl. Don't think you can escape. Don't ever *dream* you can escape from us."

I couldn't speak. Fear, pain, and nausea dragged me like a lodestone. The world spun and shrank to a speck as darkness seeped inward. In a moment, all was black.

The same dream. Experienced countless nights. The past reincarnated. Aching scars reopened. My deepest grief, relived.

But this time, the *darkness* faltered.

In that absolute black, I heard voices. *Your* voices. Millions of them. A tsunami rising, a chorus calling across the ever-changing fabric of time. And in a drowsing state, moments before waking, when inspiration meets the practicality of day, my eyes *opened*.

The answer crystallized within my mind.

Part I

A child's life is like a piece of paper
on which every person leaves a mark.

Chinese proverb

Chapter 1

To those of us who believe in physics, this separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, if a stubborn one.

Albert Einstein

Nothing is as it seems or as it might be.

Stay with me for a while, hear my story, and you'll understand. Understand your sweeping ignorance—of yourself, your loved ones, our enslaved world. Your naive ideas of truth. Maybe then, you'll come to terms with how critical you are to what might someday become.

On the cover of this book, you're reading an author's name. He believes this story is full of his ideas, born from his own mind. It's not. *I* am writing it *through* him. In his delusion, it's all part of a clever plot he's stitched together, down to this very sentence saying he *isn't* writing it. Instead, it is the effort of my mind reaching out, back through what you call time. I inspire him, shape his thoughts, convince him of this reality.

Sound crazy? It is. I know it is. And *I'm* the one doing it. But

it is also *true*. A terrible truth that will grow and grow with my words until it all but overwhelms.

I don't enjoy this, playing puppet master with this citizen of your time. But our need is hopelessly desperate. We have lost more than you can imagine. Nothing remains but ashes in the cold of space.

I've done worse. This is dangerous, both for his mind and my own. Already, I have failed many times to send my message. Wayward efforts wrecked the receiving minds, driving them to madness. At other times, what has come out of the author is a story so warped by his own imaginings that my message is garbled. Your libraries hold some of these disasters. I pray this, my last effort, will not fail.

You must understand so much before you can accept the message. Strange things. Horrible things. Things that can't possibly be true but are. Understanding, you can find the faith to take the final step.

You will need to break free from your shallow and misguided conceptions of time. This may be the greatest stumbling block. Isolated, time is a crushing monolith. A glacier pressing forward with a godlike, unstoppable force, flattening history. Time freezes the past. It is untouchable and unchangeable. And what will happen, the future, is imprisoned by the now.

Can you hear the universe laughing at such childish ideas?

The first dogma to release is that time is alone. *Space* and time go together, feed off one another, in grand loops and dances, changing both. I know this, I *live* this, because this unceasing dance performs in my mind's eye like a rainbow in the mist.

You must surrender the distortion that the past is set and the future immaterial. *Spacetime* is an ever-existing clay trapped inside the great bubble we call the cosmos. Like clay, it can be shaped, changing past, present, and future. Always with rules. But not yet with rules any creature has come to fully understand.

These are empty abstractions, colorless phrases teaching little and distorting much of the living experience. I hope you will understand more as you hear my story.

It is because of these truths I can reach you now, and only because of them that I need to. You see, as much as the future can reach back into the past, the *past* can reach *forward* into the future. And in our time of need, we need you of our recent past. You have a part to play in righting a terrible wrong, saving billions of lives, and reversing humanity's horrific fate. Somehow in these pages, I must convince you of this. May I be forgiven if I can't.

My parents called me Ambra Dawn, and I am a Reader. And while I tell you my story, it is not mine alone. It belongs to all of us.

Chapter 2

It seemed that our family had been on this land for thousands of years; that we had sprung from the earth, born of its flesh like a tree or a flower, deep-rooted, not by our feet, but by our hearts.

Thea Halo, *Not Even My Name*

I was born beside the yellow-green cornfields of Nebraska.

My father was one of the last independent farmers in the Midwest. The great agribusiness corporations of the twenty-first century had eaten most. He was tall and lanky, in his mid-forties when I lost him. Of Scottish heritage, his fair skin reddened but refused to tan in the long summer seasons. He had crisp gray eyes and large hands that held me like a small ear of corn. And, just like the dream, he loved to toss me into the air, laughing with a thousand lines creasing his face.

Remembering him now, I see he was beautiful.

Unstudied and little learned, he had a real gift for predicting the weather. A more accurate forecaster than the best meteorological models, which saved more than one harvest. It was a

stark sign of the terrible genetics that would combine to produce me.

My mother was also beautiful. From a Celtic background too—an Irishwoman new to the United States. She *found* my father more than she met him, a destiny she orchestrated. You'd find her a stereotype out of a book of fables—a classic lady of the Green Isle. Pale and redheaded, fiery in spirit and with her tongue.

The recessive genes just keep adding up.

More than my father, she *forecast*, but beyond weather and into many areas of life. In the Dark Ages, fire and a stake might have been her fate for witchcraft. But my mother was a devout Catholic. Her abilities were all too natural. They sprang from a soft spot of unusual tissue and blood vessels buried deep within her brain. An odd but harmless clump of cells dismissed by medical science as an insignificant cyst. Pain would teach me the truth about these matters soon enough.

Two years after they married, I was born.

I got my mother's red hair and green eyes. Both parents' skin mixed in me to the palest white possible outside albinism. The real kicker? A combination of genes producing a tumor in my brain in the same place as my mother's small psychic cyst. We'll get back to that soon, because without the tumor, none of what I am going to tell you would have happened.

In the beginning, I was just a normal farm girl. Well, maybe *normal* isn't the right word. I was *definitely* a farm girl, though. With my first steps, I was playing with the animals, rolling in hay, and happiest with the earth under my bare feet.

How cruel is the irony when I think back on what has happened to me. What I would give now to see the sky again. To feel the earth underneath, or to run the plowed soil through my hands. To believe it was still there, that it existed *somewhere.* That would be enough, more than I would ask for after this terrible journey.

But normal, no. I can't say I was ever normal. Normal means perceiving and reacting to life like most people. Resembling their behavior. Being treated in a like manner. One after the other, I lost all these things.

First to go was seeing things like others. A perpendicular perspective always colored my experience. My mother noticed. She knew something was different about me, eyeing me like an artifact from another world. She loved me, don't misunderstand. But she recognized an *otherness* about me that even a mother's love couldn't comprehend. Her own sixth sense would not be denied.

In a way, that was good. I didn't worry about surprising her or letting her down. I don't think my dad understood, not even when they came to "cure" me. Which was good in its way, since his love never had to get through any walls and always reached me.

But the first time I realized I was a freak was when my dog died.

As a child, I experienced many wild and strange dreams. After I described a few to friends and my parents, I learned by their reactions to leave them inside my own head. Crucified unicorns. Cables crawling out of my eyes. Monsters with blades cutting into my arms and legs and skull. Drowning in an infinite avalanche of ghosts—that kind of thing. But I had learned the difference between reality and dream. Or so I thought.

One night, I dreamed our sheepdog died. He dashed in a thunderstorm, barking at the deep subsonic throb driving some dogs crazy. In a flash of lightning, he seized and fell over. In the dream, I could see through him to the clot in his heart, and I watched a glow dim in his brain. I woke shaking and chilled but said nothing to anyone. Another nightmare to lock away and forget.

When distant relatives visited, my dad would always drone about the weather. Then he'd tell the Flat Joke. "Well, it's very flat out here this time of year."

Nebraska is *really* flat. The storms approach for hours. Three weeks after my dream, a tempest marched from the west. A horizon-spanning wave of gray mountains pushed across the plains. I shook, not because I'm afraid of storms, but because I was afraid of *this* storm. Because I'd seen it before.

The sun darkened. The rain poured like electrified syrup. I froze as a horror film replayed my dog barking, running, and falling over dead in the grass. This time, I couldn't see through him. But I knew. I knew what was inside.

And I knew I was a freak.

When your perception of reality diverges from that of others, you become divergent. I had eyes no one else did. They experienced visions in time. Not intuitions, not a vague sense of doom or excitement—*revelations*. They began in dreams but soon trespassed into the waking day.

In my childhood, visions of the future were a minority. For a Reader, it's a lot easier to see into the past. More and more, both kinds of visions intruded into my awareness. They disturbed my days and nights, walling me away from society. When you have seen your own birth, watched your mother scream in agony as she pushed you into the world like some deformed lump of lasagna, it changes you. When you can't tell anyone these things, this private prison warps your consciousness. You form your own thoughts. *Different* thoughts. Thoughts imprinting your psyche through unique molds.

And that is when you lose the ability to think in a normal manner.

By the time I was ten, I was one odd little girl. I couldn't relate to the kids at school or to any adults. Not with the endless parade of premonitions. Not with the divergent perspectives they brought. They were phantoms, always shadowing me. Playing reels behind my eyes, movies only I could watch. Boring. Interest-

ing. Dreadful. Events I knew were real, or I feared would be real someday.

I became ostracized by my peers. My teachers couldn't reach me. My parents were distraught. They needed to fix me.

And so, the evaluations began. Meetings with social workers. Examinations by psychologists. Doctors. And, at last, the neurologists. Brain scans.

Finally, something concrete, something physiologically wrong with me that they could lean on. Something to explain all the weirdness and problems.

And something that brought me to the attention of those dark forces really controlling the fate of our world.

Chapter 3

Behind the ostensible government sits enthroned an invisible government owing no allegiance and acknowledging no responsibility to the people.

Theodore Roosevelt

If I could give you any one piece of advice to help you in your time, I would say turn off your TV and internet. Throw your phone into a river. *Never* look at it again. Take your video game console and controllers—build a bonfire. Don't go online again.

I'm completely serious. What I know and what you don't, is that all our digital technology was not the product of our tremendous cleverness. No, it was a gift, *from above*. Or rather, a drug, a poison—electromagnetic narcotics for controlling clueless human herds. To *Them*, you're all just a gene pool with potential. Tech keeps you docile and reproducing in ignorance. Meanwhile, the greatest show on Earth called *human culture* plays out. One giant sham.

Some of you recognize it—you with still slumbering Reader gifts. It throbs deep in your bones. Some of you outcasts, on the streets or in the mountains or institutions. You knew all along much more of the truth than our comfortable and successful swarms. You've tasted that sharp sense of betrayal, the jagged lie plunged into your psyche. The gasping certainty swimming in your thoughts that things *don't fit*.

Well, they don't. I'll explain more as we go. Meanwhile, grab a book, go stare at the stars. *Think*. You're a junkie, strapped into a pleasure tube—a pig ready for the slaughter, or worse. Don't let them control your mind one more day.

Advice from a former slave. Take it or leave it.

My journey of bondage was about to begin. The brain scans defied wishful thinking. At eleven years old, I understood. Beyond the medial reports, I had my half-glimpsed dreams.

At first, Reading the future can be like that. It's more *remembering the future* than seeing it. Have you woken from a dream, details bleeding from your mind, staring dumbfounded at the remaining, colorless outlines? That's a vision of a time to come.

Most of them, anyway. Sometimes, like a horrid nightmare, the experience will overwhelm you. And like a nightmare, these *prophecies* will break your stable state of consciousness. Prescience provides a psychic slap to the brain, branding the details into your awareness. But those were rare in my early years. Mostly, I experienced half-remembered fragments I could never reconstruct.

The visions of my own future were foggy. I struggled to retain the murky memories of my coming illness, of the soon-to-be nurtured tumor in my head. The doctors were amazed I could still see.

The mass was the size of a golf ball—quaint to me now. It grew in the back of my brain between what the neurologists call the occipital and parietal lobes. These are big slabs of flesh doing

different things. The occipital lobe, at the *back* of your head, processes visual information from your eyes (which are at the *front* of your head—God works in mysterious ways, believe me). The parietal lobe does a lot of things, like sensing where you are, navigating, working with numbers, moving objects.

The tumor was expanding towards the occipital lobe like some elliptical missile, crashing into all those cells processing information from my eyes. The doctors couldn't understand why I wasn't blind already. My parents looked sick listening to all of this. I was half-scared, half-remembering some blurry future where all this awful stuff wasn't nearly the worst that was going to happen to me.

"It appears to be a fast-growing tumor," one doctor said. "Many children's tumors grow quickly, the cells dividing like the rest of the growing body, but worse. This is very serious, and very difficult to cure. We recommend you send her to specialists. We can't treat her here."

So began the quest for oncologists across the country. Nebraska has great medical facilities in Omaha, but they referred me to Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. My parents were on the phone for hours with doctors and relatives in New York. We'd all see enough medical offices to last a lifetime. And week by week, the brain scans showed the thing inside my head kept getting bigger. We prepared for a long trip to the East Coast.

Then one day, just like the dream, without any kind of warning, three black cars with tinted windows arrived at our farm. Out of these black beetles rushed the men of the nightmare I relive over and over again. They barged into our home. They tried to convince my parents to release me into their "care." And when my parents would not, they took me by force.

When I woke from the blackness, I was dragged from the car by one of the burly men in a suit. He threw me over his shoulder,

grunting as he carted me towards a long, metallic, one-story building. In my foggy state of mind, it seemed so unimportant, so featureless and unreal. But it would be my prison for many years to come.

A place from which, as the man had promised, I would not escape.

Chapter 4

Madam, I have come from a country where people are hanged if they talk.

Leonhard Euler

Trapped in their prison, before they sold me into slavery, I grasped in my heart I would never escape. Beyond freedom, I entertained no hope of living long. The things they did to me, the agony of each hour, convinced me I had gone to hell. Or hell on Earth, and my time here would be the final years of torture leading to my death.

I possessed none of the critical knowledge I would later piece together. Their purposes lacked meaning. The damage they inflicted was random and obscene. Pure torment without any goal except to tear down my person, to shred all faith from the soul of a young child.

Unconscious on the ground in the cornfields my dad had planted himself—that was my last day in Nebraska. That dark

evening was my final glimpse of my parents. I never returned. Now, returning is impossible.

I didn't know what had happened to my mother and father. You might assume ignorance of their fate would have been a curse. It is also a curse to know the exact fate of those you love when that fate is evil. The past is not hidden from me. It wasn't a year before I experienced a vision of their murder, the cruelty of the men who visited my house, how they disposed of their bodies without respect.

I'll spare you details. But I wasn't spared. I suspected the truth, but the endless visions denied me the grace to hope or doubt. By the time I was twelve, I knew I was alone and in the hands of monsters.

My eyesight had started to go, but I was way beyond expecting my captors to care. As you'll see, it was quite the opposite; they wanted me blind. And they always got what they wanted.

During my first year, as my vision faded, I was introduced to my new "home." My new way of life. I learned for the first time how to live in constant fear. When I displeased them, they beat or starved me for the slightest infraction of their regulations. Again and again, they inflicted strategic suffering, until they bent and broke me into the shape they required.

I became a giant exposed nerve, terrified of their cruel police sticks and electric wires. The farm girl was unmade. Her former threads were stitched into that of a caged creature, responsive to their commands. A well-trained animal.

Their rules were both simple and strange. There were the practical, if harsh, rules about living. Where to stand and sleep and eat. How to behave, how to answer questions and obey.

Speak out of turn to another child and the stick might smash. Out of your bed in the middle of the night? Because you needed to stretch, or pee, or think, or something? The cameras would record it. The next

day, they might plug you into the wires, fire raging through you. Not so far as to cause permanent damage. They didn't want to devalue their product. But it was more than enough for their purposes.

The other rules were the scariest. None of the children could understand them. Nothing frightens a child more than incomprehensible demands and punishment for failure.

Many days, the techs paraded us from our rooms and force-marched us down long corridors soaked in fluorescent radiation. We'd stop at glass-encased laboratories with rows of electronic equipment. They'd sit us there, dropping headgear that sprouted a hundred wires over our heads. Opaque glass masked our vision in the helmets. Noise-canceling tech blocked sound from reaching our ears. All sounds except the commands of the experimenters. They would ask us to describe what we saw, to find our way through labyrinths our eyes couldn't see. When we couldn't, they were displeased.

My heart weeps for my twelve-year-old self, sitting alone with a giant steampunk cap on my head, surrounded by people who killed my parents, who beat and tortured me, and who asked me to see the universe in a way I did not understand.

It was far darker for the less gifted children. Day after day, they stumbled and failed to progress. Day after day, the devils hurt them.

It became clear I was special. Before they realized my improvement, I saw *something* when other stimulus vanished. More and more, I found my way through the trials they erected for me, although I couldn't grasp the purpose. As my eyesight deteriorated—the sensory deprivation did little to take away what was almost gone—I developed a conscious new sense. Patterns, substance, *something* took shape in a place I couldn't name, and I gained the power to succeed. And success was all that mattered. This hell had mangled me, broken my will. Luxuries, like purpose,

didn't matter. Meaning was irrelevant. Only that the pain stopped.

Soon, I was all the rage with the people in white coats. How they fawned over me and smiled, happy with their little animal performing so well. They isolated me further from the other children. They subjected me to special experiments. Around this time, the operations began.

Meeting Ricky before they started the series of surgeries saved me.

Ricky was the one kid able to smile in this sterile place of cold lights and metal corridors. Silly and fat, a few years older than me, and an obsessed Red Sox fan who could name every player and team statistic since 1908, Ricky became my only friend. The others were too hurt, too traumatized, and too afraid to share with anyone. Like shocked lab rats, they huddled to themselves.

Ricky braved beatings. He kept his spirit through the torment. And on occasion, he made me smile. Doesn't sound like much, but in the depths of hell, a smile is a miracle.

Once, I dared whisper to him in rations line. I asked him how he had the courage to dare the things he did.

He smirked. "My old man," he mumbled in his strong Boston tones, "beat me worse than this many nights, after he'd been drinking." He leaned close to me, glancing over his shoulders, looking into my eyes, eyes seeing him as a blur now. "These whitecoats, they're mean jerks and all, but they ain't nothing compared to a good drunk."

He straightened as a whitecoat walked by, staring ahead. As she passed, I couldn't help risking more words.

"Ricky, why are we here? What do they want from us?" It was the first time I had asked anything since I arrived.

He shook his head. "They won't tell, and we ain't gonna find out. What's important is not them, but *us*. What *we* want, why *we're* here. If we make it all about them, well—" he nodded

toward the other kids, "—we'll end up like them. Find your reason, Ambra. Hold to it. Don't let them be your reason, or take yours away."

Too many damn words. Two whitecoats grabbed Ricky and dragged him out of line. To another beating. They gave me, their star pupil, a disapproving glare. I couldn't stop a tear from running down the side of one cheek. *My fault*. Like so much to come. My fault.

At the time, I didn't understand his meaning. But his words stayed with me, circling in my mind. Months later, when I drowned in despair, they landed somewhere deep inside. They planted themselves, growing into a sapling. Inch by inch, root by branch, the seed became a great oak tree. With muscled roots and colossal arms and ten thousand leaves blowing in the wind of my soul. His words inspired me to find my reason, any reason. They saved me.

It wasn't long before they took Ricky away. He knew it was coming. "I can't make heads or tails of these tests," he hissed to me after a helmet session. "They won't be keeping me." He sounded sad but not defeated. I always remember that tone in his voice. He was going to lose everything. But he was not going to surrender.

Our time together wasn't long. We spoke brief paragraphs. I never knew the details of his face. But I will never forget him.

Months and years of having monsters cut on you, carve up your skull and brain, and for such a terrible purpose—I was near surrender, my soul broken. But despite their violations, I found my way. I found my reason.

Deep into the past I retreated, and out of the past I stumbled into my future.

Chapter 5

True knowledge comes only through suffering.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

He was younger than the other whitecoats, with a sparse beard and longish black hair. At least that's how I remembered him from the earlier times he'd worked with me. Now, he was a featureless blur, and I knew him by his voice.

The excitement was too much for him. He bubbled over with words he should not have spoken.

"You're special, Ambra," he said as he yanked the helmet off my head. "We've never seen a child like you before. You've mastered all the navigation drills, succeeding in ways we don't even understand. And the other things you're doing...what *are* you doing in there?"

When they ask you a question, you have to answer.

"I don't know, sir."

He stared at me for a quiet moment. "No. You probably

don't." He sighed and turned away from me. "We haven't had a visit in several years. Soon they'll come back, and we'll lose you." He sounded genuinely distressed. Not for me, to be sure, but for losing his prize guinea pig.

A thought brightened his tone. "But next week, a new phase in your training will begin. Next week is your first surgery!" he said, expecting me to understand the import of the statement.

My expression disappointed.

"You know what the surgeries are for, don't you?"

I was still naive enough to remember the original lies these criminals gave my parents before they murdered them.

"No. Maybe...for my tumor?"

His voice rose. "Yes, Ambra. Very good. For your tumor." Talking to me like I was three years old.

"They will take it out, finally? It's getting hard to see."

Silence. My stomach dropped. In my small hope, I had spoken out of turn. Worse, had I said something bad? They hadn't beaten or shocked me for a long time. The thought of either made me sweat.

He spoke, his tone melancholy. "Yes, we've noticed your visual impairment. It's not unexpected." He set the helmet down with a thud on the counter. "Come, our time is finished here. I won't see you for a few weeks, not until after your recovery. Over the coming months, we'll see how you progress."

That was the first hint of what they were planning for me. It was also my first realization that my trials were part of something larger than this place. *Who* would come soon? What was navigation? And why was what I was experiencing and responding to in their tests so important to them?

I had little time to learn more. The morning came and nurses whisked me into a prep room. They shaved me bald, drew on my burning scalp with markers, and plopped me onto a gurney. Other blurred figures wheeled me into an operating room. Bright bulbs

burned my eyes, and the shapes of surgeons congregated above me. A needle pricked my arm, and a bag of liquid fed drops into my veins.

The room shrunk to a point. I was on the outside of the universe.

The lights and shapes rushed back to fill the room. "Wow," I heard myself say.

Away the doctors fled, and I gazed from infinity, the universe infinitesimal, my body a giant balloon. I plunged into black, darkness broken by a disorienting flash of pain and dizziness. My wild trip landed with a turbulent return to consciousness, lying in a bed, the room spinning.

My arm still had a tube dug into it. My head felt twice its normal size. *Still a balloon.* I reached to touch it, my fingers pressing against a large and swollen thing wrapped in bandages. Sitting at my side was a blurry shape, the voice recognizable. It was my talkative scientist friend. *Dr. Talkative*.

"You're awake. Good. That's *good*. The operation was a success. Aren't you happy?"

My throat hurt. I gargled a few phrases. "The tumor's gone? Why can't I see better?"

His clothes rustled as he shifted in the chair beside me. "No, Ambra. The tumor is still there. It will *always* be there, growing larger. We've created space for it to continue expanding."

The words hammered me into the bed, pinning my arms and legs.

"This will enhance further development of the unusual mass. The back and top portion of your skull have been opened up considerably."

The room was losing oxygen. I panted.

"The tissue proliferation will accelerate, so much pressure and hindrance removed."

"Please." My skull. Open. Under the bandages on my head, the thing was growing. *Growing growing growing growing.*

He chuckled, air blowing over my face as he turned toward me. "Don't make a face! You have a section of new skull, composite material in place with a greater circumference. It will have to be replaced, of course, as the tumor spreads. Further enlargement will be aided by the enhanced blood supply."

Excitement discharged extra horrors from his mouth. His breath tasted foul.

"The surgeons are very talented. They routed vessels from the occipital lobe over to the tumor. To better nourish it. This will accelerate the loss of vision, but that cannot be helped at this point."

A hand gripped mine, another patting it.

"*All* that matters is the tumor. Your *gifts* come from it, Ambra. It's your spacetime eye!" he chirped, laughing. "God, you're going to be a star!"

He dropped my arm and stood, walking out of the room. My limbs were still lead, too heavy to lift. I fought off hyperventilation as the monitors beeped in protest. Sweat soaked my neck.

Alone and nauseous, I whimpered from the bed, a twisted mockery of a girl.

And sure enough, a month later, I was blind.

Chapter 6

I myself am time inexhaustible, and I the creator whose faces are in all directions. I am death who seizes all, and the source of what is to be.

Bhagavad Gita

My dad used to say every cloud has a silver lining.

How much silver do you get for being stricken with a giant, literally head-splitting tumor that destroys your sight, a fake skull with grafted skin to cover the extra surface area of your head that will never grow a hair, leaving you looking like the hate-child of a bulbous-headed alien and a middle-aged man?

Extraordinary powers. *Check*. A central role in a galactic power struggle between good and evil. *Check*. Extraterrestrial friends who became my new family. *Yes*.

But all that was still to come. At the time, I got Ricky's Red Sox cap.

How did he do it? It shouldn't have been possible with all the

security and paranoia of this place. But he managed to smuggle his hat into this facility. He kept it hidden from the whitecoats. And when his time came, he hid it in my room, stuffing it inside the metal tube serving as one of the legs of my bed.

I was lucky to find it. Or it was inevitable. My sight disintegrating, I used my hands and feet to explore my environment. I had to relearn how to walk, and my room served as a training ground. I took the first steps there, feeling the walls, furniture, and floor. My skin became a radar of its own. The air spoke as it changed directions and taste, telling me if a door was open or if some object sliced the atmosphere with its shape. As my sight died, my other senses were growing—including my *other* sense, but I'll get to that later.

Weeks of recovery followed my surgery. Whitecoats transferred me from medical back to my cage. Healing, I had lots of time to do nothing. The cameras didn't much care anymore what I did. One day, stumbling around in my deepening blindness, I found the cap. Ricky had wrapped it in laces, rolled and mashed so it would never recover its intended form again. But it was his hat, all right. I knew from the smell. The "World Series Champions" embossed on the side didn't hurt my deduction, either.

Wearing the cap in this prison was my first step away from the pit of madness opening at my feet. My head was already too swollen for it, and this was just operation number one. I didn't care. I unsnapped the back and yanked it over the raw wounds. The grafted skin burned, and my skull throbbed, but I wore it anyway.

Silver lining? It covered the hideous addition to my body, giving me an almost normal appearance. My hair would grow in over time from the part of the scalp that still had roots. The hat hid the rest. From a distance, if you didn't look *too* closely, I might just look like an unremarkable redhead sporting a baseball cap.

I took to wearing it all the time. At first, the whitecoats

sounded disturbed by my new fashion sense. But then—*a miracle!* Since I was their budding superstar, I got special privileges. They let me wear it without further comment. I guess they wanted to keep me happy, keep me performing.

The other thing that saved me was retreating into the past. Not psychologically, where I retreat into *my* memories to hide (even if a lot of hiding occurred). I mean *everyone's* past, including my own.

As I learned later, a Reader's power grows and matures fastest in adolescence. I was right in the middle of that, my whole body changing. It might have been something I could have obsessed about if I'd had the luxury. All the other cruelty shoved puberty far to the side. But at the same time I impressed them more and more in their little examination room, other things were happening to me. I was changing in ways they didn't realize.

One of the first changes was my growing power to enter the past. I still had future visions, but what captivated me, what gleamed in high-resolution detail, what I began to be able to *control*, were my visions of what *had* happened. Or, as I like to think of it now, what might *have had* happened. Like I said—past and future, both are fluid.

In the dark and pointless hours in my cell, I traveled on long and grand adventures. Journeys to happenings of recent—and sometimes not so recent—history. Initially, I explored emotional touchstones. My childhood, my parents' lives, important world events. As I learned to control my path through time, I extended my explorations farther.

The practicality of Reading what had been, how it could impact my present and future, did not dawn on me until much later. Embarrassing I didn't think of it earlier, but I was thirteen. And I was *really* screwed up.

This developing ability allowed me to compensate for something tormenting me—my lack of education. Many children

would be glad to be free of school. Not me. Years passed with an entire sea of human knowledge denied. My captors had not only made my life hell, but they also locked me from all the light of humanity. No books, music, or art. No new ideas or experiences to foster growth. They crippled me, left me ignorant and powerless. Sometimes I panicked, performing math problems in my head or reciting lines from poems I'd read. *Desperate*.

Silver lining? My starvation for knowledge synergized with my growing tumor powers. I realized that, in the past, I had access to everything our species had achieved. *So, I went looking for it.* I launched myself into those visions, extending them, improving their clarity. I mastered the technique to maintain my attention on a specific segment of history.

A phantom lurking in the shadows, I eavesdropped on humanity. Obvious places to linger were schools and libraries. But really, the entire world was open. Did I want to learn about great art? I could study at the Louvre. Advanced calculus? I could sit at the feet of Newton (not time well spent, let me tell you). I experienced the thrill of exploring oceans and mountains. I rode in zero-g above the Earth with astronauts.

As the blackness clouded the rest of my life, the visions continued to shine in opposition. Through them, I could still see, see as vividly at times as I had with my eyes. I was blind, but in a strange way, I was not.

It wasn't always *easy* to find these elements of the past. When the visions first came, I did not control when or what I encountered, although they tended to involve things close to me. As I honed my skills over the years, I could dance through older landscapes, flipping pages in some ethereal tome. I achieved a bizarre education no human being had experienced, but one I would have traded in a second to be back on my farm with my parents again.

The obsession with the past consumed me, and I allowed it to block visions of what was to come. Amazingly stupid, considering

how useful knowing the future might have been. More baffling, I never sought out the history of this grotesque dungeon. I never examined the histories of its people, what and who they were, why they were acting as they did. How much could I have learned to help me cope, to escape my bonds? I can't justify my inability to realize the significance of what I ignored.

I can say this. I had sunk into a black hole of hopelessness, and through journeys into the past I had found light. It saved me, carried me through the experiments, the surgeries, the inhumanity of the place. I needed this different world too much. I guess a part of me ignored things closer at hand, however *useful* they might have been. The rest was more useful. It kept me sane in an insane life.

A silver lining.

Chapter 7

Most gods throw dice, but Fate plays chess, and you don't find out till too late that he's been playing with two queens all along.

Terry Pratchett, *Interesting Times*

They were all happy, happy techies in the glassy room.

The giant helmet came off and the usual lab clamor disrupted its imposed silence. Chugging ventilation. Machinery humming. Computer tones. I focused on the faster flits of motion of the team working with me. Their breathless motions, quick footfalls, and vocal lilts praised my performance. I was their local Olympic athlete, acing their silly mind games.

The trials were becoming easier and easier. Boredom weighed on me, while their excitement grew. Early on, it was such relief pleasing them. I looked forward to each new session. I craved the attention, their encouragement, the anticipated equipment read-outs when I'd finished. How quickly it all changed, thinking back on it.

Some mysteries were yielding their secrets. This device they

placed on my head stimulated the universe of my visions. Strap me in, turn it on, and I could "see" *things* created in front of me. Imagine a magic laser-disco ball, but, of course, nothing like that. A toddler gawks at the disco ball, awestruck. A child smiles and plays with it for a few minutes. Several times a week as a young teen? Well, its secrets were gone.

By my fifteenth birthday, I'd endured six surgeries. The ripening tumor was a squashed softball in my brain. Ricky's hat refused to balance on my distended skull. At least my hair could grow long again (on the sides). I vowed to myself never to cut it—in the dream place where I had such control over my life.

My whitecoat entourage had grown to a team of ten, headed by Dr. Talkative. He loved to share the latest measurements of my malignancy. He'd update me on its slowing growth. He'd outline in pleased tones how it was stabilizing within my brain.

As if I were a *willing* part of this. Like I was *thrilled* about being twisted into some grotesque monster, inch by brain-bulging inch.

The pack of them bragged about my achievements in the lab. They wanted their own trophies for what I'd accomplished. I learned that whatever it was they were doing, they didn't understand much about it. They could set it up, read the output, and conclude whether I was succeeding or not. But they understood nothing else. They buzzed around in their white coats, important and full of themselves. Twisting knobs. Pushing buttons. Recording data. But they were just clueless. People using a microwave with no idea what it's all about inside.

They were also ignorant about what I was seeing, blind to how simple it was all becoming. Underneath the helmet, my developing sense glimpsed a greater universe. One they could not perceive or imagine. As for my visions, past or future, they hadn't a clue.

The devils had cooked up this freak, but they couldn't fathom what they had made.

As I outgrew their disco ball, I aced all the tests. They became repetitive. Dull. Near the end, I could perform in the background, while I daydreamed or explored the past. That was the case on the day the news came.

The team was bubbling with joy from my latest *bored out of my mind* performance. Dr. Talkative rolled into the room like a storm cloud. The hairs on my arm pricked at the tension in his voice and movements. I smelled anxiety in his sweat. The others saw it in his face. I bet it looked bad.

"I have some unfortunate information," he overstated the obvious. He glanced at the monitor. "Fantastic work today, Ambra." He sighed. "You've outgrown us."

He placed his clipboard down with a clack and stepped back into the middle of the room to address his staff. "And like all children when they grow up, you must move on."

I heard groans and the awkward shifts of uncomfortable people. High-pitched notes squawked from a tech. "They can't come now! She's just showing us her potential!"

A baritone carped, "They won't care about what she can do, what she could become. They'll strap her into a navslav ship, and she'll waste away her life like the rest of them!"

Interesting. While it wasn't exactly comforting to hear I was doomed to a lifetime of servitude, the outburst opened my eyes, so to speak. Startled me for the first time since I had come to this place. To watch them fall from the top of the food chain—it was priceless! *The fear in their voices.* Who were these mysterious *They* who were coming and over whom they had no power? The whitecoats were my local nonbenevolent deities. It was discombobulating, but liberating, to see them shake.

"That's enough, all of you! It doesn't matter what we think or want." He paused. His next tones were a dirge. "As you know, we have, in our enthusiasm...*tampered* with their property. I believe it was a step in the right direction for science, for the potential that

lies within the human race. But *They* may be displeased. I don't have to remind you how serious the punishment can be for infractions."

Silence fell for a long moment. My heart thudded against my ribs.

"Nevertheless, as your group leader, I will take full responsibility for these actions. I pray you will maintain your appropriate demeanor when our visitors arrive tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" someone gasped in disbelief.

"Yes. For some reason, we didn't receive their communication from the Belt. They are entering orbit as we speak. We are to prepare the children for transport in the morning."

Chapter 8

Once upon a time, Zhuangzi was dreaming that he was a butterfly dancing and flying about, joyous and free. He had forgotten that he was Zhuangzi. Then he awoke and felt himself solid and sure. But he didn't know anymore if he was Zhuangzi who had dreamed he was a butterfly, or, a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi.

Zhuang Zhou

In orbit?

What in the world did this mean? In my weird journey through the annals of human knowledge, visitation from aliens didn't earn much respect. Like believing in ghosts. Sociology argued such claims were the current incarnations of demons or angels. "They are a projection of our well-documented, overly active imagination contextualized to the modern mythology," as one lecturer put it. Harvard professor, I think. Respected astronomers pointed out many clear problems with extraterrestrial arrivals. The distances between the closest stars required centuries

of transit. Hyperspace and warp-speed were conceits of science-fiction authors to enable their narratives.

How ironic my future doomed me to hyperspace travel of a very real sort. A future where I'd navigate for aliens that couldn't possibly be visiting us. It was a sad case of solid thinking being wrong and loony thinking being right. Well, I can tell you—life isn't fair.

It took me a while to fall asleep that night and my sleep was disturbed. In the early hours of the morning, a powerful vision shook my consciousness. I stood in a cavernous chamber carved from strange and unearthly material. The walls and ceiling resembled marble mixed with the dirt of a termite mound. Odd patterns and unusual color mixtures decorated the floors. Huge moss-green pillars sprouted like trees. Thick vines of stone erupted from the ground, climbing to the dome-like enclosure, supporting it in a hundred places.

Rows of these columns converged on a colossal dais. On an ornate chair squatted a monstrous form, insectile, inhuman. Other beasts dragged a young man to the platform, their hard-shelled forms buffeting his soft flesh. Bloodied and bruised, his face tense with pain, he glared toward the raised throne. Chills shook me as I realized mangled human bodies hung from the walls as macabre decorations.

The creature on the throne oriented a set of three eyestalks on what might have been a head toward the man. A coarse sound filled the room as it spoke in a hideous mockery of language. Awkward, translated by some device, the grating dialogue rattled the wide space in deep frequencies. The bone and artificial material in my skull vibrated.

"Human Reader—you have lost the time. If you and we cooperate, you to be able to rescue your people. If you do not, these deaths here only a mild beginning will seem."

The young man slumped, yet a fire burned in his eyes. He

clenched his jaw, and I remembered what he would say. *Madness.* I could not let him. I wanted to beg him to stop the slaughter I'd witnessed around that throne. Stop the pain lurking behind those metallic, insectile tones. Stop the terrible destiny rising to choke me like a poisonous fog.

He cried out. "You can do with me as you wish, but another approaches. She will bring your end. You cannot hide—she sees all. I feel her. Beside me. She watches even now!"

The experience overwhelmed me, and I lost the threads of the vision. I sat on my bed, cradling my knees. Tears poured down my face, and I fell asleep crying like a little child.

I woke to the sound of my door scraping open. Rapid footsteps clattered toward me.

"Ambra, you have to dress, now. You must come with me *immediately*."

It was one of the women, an aide on the experimental team. Her voice dripped with fear.

Chapter 9

In the ordinary theory of relativity, every line that can describe the motion of a material point, i.e., every line consisting only of time-like elements, is necessarily non-closed. An analogous statement cannot be claimed for the theory developed here. Therefore a priori a point motion is conceivable, for which the four-dimensional path of the point would be an almost closed one. In this case one and the same material point could be present in an arbitrarily small space-time region in several seemingly mutually independent exemplars. This runs counter to my physical imagination most vividly.

Albert Einstein

The room was dank and yellow.

Dank because the staff had raised the humidity to some absurd level. Moisture trickled from anything it could condense on. Window glass. The metallic walls. A dark-green material like none I'd seen composing the bulk of the funky spacesuit in front of me.

Yellow because the lights in the room were filtered. Another

effort to comfort Squidy as he (she? it?) swam in the sea of whatever liquid was inside the suit—water? Or why the humidity?

Squidy couldn't have been more of an alien if it tried. Either that or some mutant octopus outfitted by the US government. A sack mockingly reminiscent of a head flapped from the top of it. It was a dark brownish-green, oblong, and squishy like an octopus's head, but often invaginated. Deflating hot-air balloons popped into my mind. A random patchwork of protruding lumps suggested eyes of some sort. Long whiskers running off the head-sack gave Squidy the look of a cactus that had forgotten to shave for a few days. Octopusesque arms lacked suckers but sprouted thin dexterous tendrils at the end. These "fingers" manipulated objects floating in the suit.

Okay, you are likely asking yourself, "*How does she know all this? She's blind*."

It was impossible, but as I saw these things, it did not surprise me. The stress of this encounter shoved my brain into survival mode. My panicking neurons integrated my new Reader sense into my mind's general scheme of decoding reality. Later, aboard the navships, I pieced together what had happened. Turns out the ability to see into the past has a practical application to the life of the blind.

So bear with me for now and trust me when I tell you, my visual descriptions of the event are accurate.

Dr. Talkative vibrated like a taut string, his face the aftermath of salmonella poisoning. The female aide led me beside him to a dripping, metallic chair in the middle of the room.

What nightmare was this?

I recoiled, my heartbeat sharp and quick, but she pushed me forward. Harsh straps hung from the seat for my arms, legs, and head. Their metal reflected the jaundiced light. I blinked, sweat pooling on my eyebrows.

She pressed me into the device and clamped the restraints over

my wrists. My breathing labored when she locked my ankles. My body shook when they placed the silver band around my head. She snapped it tight, and my neck jerked backward like someone yanked my hair. I couldn't move my head. I couldn't move anything. They could do anything to me, and I was powerless to stop what might be coming.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice shaking. She scampered away. The door to the chamber closed with a loud clank.

"Try to relax, Ambra," began Dr. Talkative. "You are property of the Navigation Conglomerate. A representative of the Sortax is here to examine you. You will speak when spoken to and obey all its requests. Your life and your future depend on its assessment of you today."

Squidy took over. There wasn't any doubt it had been in charge the entire time, of course.

It spoke. The sound shook me further. The artificial voice of a translator carried a tone and quality I had heard hours earlier in my dream. The voices of the insect throne room barked from a device a few feet before me. Images of mutilated corpses flashed through my awareness.

"They are that, which they changed?" it rang out.

Adrenaline raced through me as I parsed the question.

Dr. Talkative bailed me out. "He's asking about the surgeries. He means our operations with your tumor, Ambra."

"Yes, I guess, I am."

"They are that, which were not authorized."

I didn't respond, assuming it was a statement and not a question. Dr. Talkative squirmed. Squidy floated about, jerking its appendages every second or two.

"They will serve in navslav the ships and supervised. They with value, exchanged for with the Dram."

A small glowing object drifted into the path of several tendrils

inside the suit. The tentacle holding the device reached out toward me.

Brightness. Fire. *Agony.* My mind burst.

I shrieked, howled, slobbered all over myself, and tore a chunk from my cheek. Truly, I had never experienced pain. Not the surgeries, not the beatings or electric shocks, nothing prepared me for that flame. You don't have my tumor, my sixth sense. I can't explain it to you.

A light thousands of times too strong for your eyes? Flooding all your experience, tied to two red-hot iron knives? Drive them together into your sockets, sear your optic nerve, and cook your brain?

No. That's not half of it. In an instant, my unique window to the universe transformed from gift to curse. It became the raw skin over which a terrible acid burned. Every muscle in my body convulsed. I projectile-vomited across the room, coating my visitor and Dr. Talkative in the process.

As the pain ceased, the world dissolved, and the next thing I knew, the sad woman hovered over me, calling my name. She wiped my mouth clean and removed a needle from my arm, her face blanched to match my own. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

"Ambra, talk to me. Are you okay?"

"Mom. I want my mom."

The woman blinked away tears. "I'm sorry. She's not here. Please, you need to wake up, *now*. *They* need to question you more. *They* can't wait for you to get any better." Anger tinged her tone.

She brushed another cold, damp cloth over my face. I tried to focus, to bring my concentration back from the pit of hell still burning around the edge of my consciousness. My mind was winter sap sliding down rough bark. It staggered forward. The dank room resolved. Two forms in front of me distinguished themselves. One horrible, from a nightmare. The other the man

who had mutilated and deformed me, changing me into something powerful but also terribly vulnerable.

"Ambra," started Dr. Talkative. "We are sorry for that...disruption. You were being scanned with a device designed to probe your powers of perception. Only it is calibrated for a normal Reader. You are not a normal Reader. The signal was too strong," he stammered, shaking his head. Later, when examined by the doctors of the Resistance, I would learn I had almost died that day.

"Enough," clanged out the voice translator. "We again scan."

"No...please..." I begged them.

I would have done anything at that moment to prevent them from scanning me again. Given them anything. Promised anything, said anything. I would have debased myself with all my heart. It would not have mattered what—jump off a cliff to my death? Sure. A thousand times easier than being scanned.

"Ambra, it's okay. We've lowered the signal strength considerably. It will be safe now. You must be conscious for the examination. Let us know if you are in pain."

"The pain do not constitute," it injected.

"She may be valuable to the Dram," Dr. Talkative noted.

"They may be," it concluded.

It raised the device toward me again. I tensed, and while the experience was painful, I tolerated it. Despite the discomfort, it was interesting to some abstract part of my awareness. *The patterns!* This was the advanced version of the disco ball. Disco Ball 2.0. The structure and substructure. It was like nothing I'd experienced from the headsets. When it ended, images of dancing shapes in multiple dimensions burned as afterimages in my tumor, staying with me for days.

"Not authorized," it sounded out as the visions faded. "They are for the navships."

"No! She is more than that! You can't fry her mind and expect to get a meaningful scan!"

The creature turned its earthsuit-encased form toward Dr. Talkative. The scientist shrank like a shadow at noon.

"Not authorized," it spit, lumbering to a door at the other end of the room.

As it left me and the doctor alone, relief washed over me like a cooling rain. A relief in the presence of a man who had carved me into the freak I was. Relief because, however traumatized we both were, whatever he had done to me and whatever had been done to him over the years, we were human. Until you have encountered the alien, the truly alien and not simply strange, you will never understand the deep comfort the nearness of another human being brings. Even your tormentor.

I shivered, wet and stinking in my stained clothes, still strapped into the metal chair and unable to move. Every piece of my body ached.

Dr. Talkative looked at me and closed his eyes. His hand reached out and pressed a button on a controller hanging from a string around his neck. Water droplets maintained a slow rhythm, plopping against the floor as they fell. The door behind me squeaked and footsteps clacked through his defeated tones.

"You'll leave tonight with the other children."

Chapter 10

Time has no specific character of being. In relativity theory the temporal relation is like far and near in space. I do not believe in the objectivity of time. The concept of Now never occurs in science itself, and science is supposed to be concerned with the objective.

Kurt Gödel

I'm sure it must be exhilarating for kids to leave home for camp. Journeying away from the parents who have always cared for them. Living with strangers, new rules, dangers, and opportunities. Or going to college, stepping out for the first time as an adult, exciting although you might have a safety net most of the time to fall back on. *Adventure!*

To hell with adventure. I was scared. Terrified, actually. Just a few years before, I had lost a beautiful life—a nice home with parents I loved and who loved and cared for me. I spied on the past and witnessed their murder. The villains who had destroyed my family moved on to torturing and deforming me. Where was I captive, but in hell?

But this terrible place transformed. Now it was a haven, a refuge compared to the infinite dark and alien waiting above. These creatures would take me and some untold number of kids with them like trained animals. Rip us away from our home planet and from any sense of security or the familiar.

How could I cope? I would see many an Earth child *not* cope, their body degrading, their mind fracturing. Hordes wasting away or exploding in lunacy. And *They* removed the sick efficiently.

I sat in my room, wearing the long and featureless robe handed to me. My hands tensed in my lap, cold, twisted over one another. I had no belongings, no mementos of family, no toys, no evidence of a life of any kind. The one artifact was the Red Sox hat, perched on my bulbous crown, and I didn't know if it would survive what was coming. I gazed, unseeing, over my bare room as the minutes crawled by, one unit of time shuffling after the other. Waiting.

The door swung open, and I jumped. It was Dr. Talkative, which was unusual, as he had never visited my room. He was alone, which was also unusual, since his staff and team always followed him or lurked nearby. The door closed with a click. Metal screeched as he dragged a chair across the stone floor toward me. With a sigh and disturbance in the air, he sat down.

"Ambra. We don't have much time. *They* will call soon for the children, and we must deliver you to the docking chamber."

He shifted his weight, and the seat squeaked. I waited for him to say whatever he was there to say.

"It's unfortunate what happened during your examination. Years of hard work destroyed! All because that clumsy Sortax representative would not listen to me. I *know* you are capable of so much more."

Tears dropped down my cheeks. After everything, after all they had done to me, despite the sense of strength and rebellion I'd gained the last few years—it all evaporated. I crumbled into a

small ball. Nothing existed but the desperate guilt of a wayward child.

"I'm sorry," I whimpered. "I really tried." Sobs shook my shoulders, breaths choked as I fought to hold the shame inside.

The strangest thing happened. My abuser rose and sat next to me. He placed his arm around my back. I couldn't help but stiffen.

"Ambra, listen to me," he said as I stifled my sounds. "Humanity is in a terrible place. There is so much you don't know."

His voice turned guttural. He licked his lips.

"*Cattle*. We're nothing more than bipedal cattle to these aliens. Dumb masses dancing. Ignorant. Stupid. And the rest of us? We're the worst."

He shuddered beside me, his arm a claw tightening across my torso. His speech dropped an octave.

"I'm sorry for what I've done to you. Years ago, before *They* took me, I would have been ashamed of it. Perhaps I am inside, still. Because I chose what I thought was the easy way. Became their willing slave. To succeed in this sick system—it was all that mattered." He inhaled. "*Don't you make this mistake*."

The arm jerked away, and he grasped my shoulders, turning me toward him.

"I'm going to tell you something no one else knows, something important. For the human race. Something I've buried, denied, rationalized away for years."

What was I to say to that? Nothing made sense. Nobody was sane.

"Please, just listen and remember. You can't process right now. I know that. But you will, later."

He dropped his hands to the bed. His voice became a whisper, tones strange and inflected. It was like hearing scripture.

"Many years ago, when I first came to this place, still working as a tech with the new children, there was a young boy. Not much

older than you are now. He was preparing to ship out, just as you are tonight. I'd given him his last series of shots like you got earlier. I was about to walk away when he spoke to me. He was a very gifted child. Second only to you, Ambra, in what he could do with the spacetime matrices. He stared at me with his deep-brown eyes —I'll never forget. His eyes or the words that came out of his mouth.

"'*Doctor, a young girl will come. She is the sunrise. She will see with truth into the darkest night. She is our hope, the savior of this world in its coming trial. You will recognize her by her signs, and you will understand after you have sinned against her. Before the end, you must give her my message: Daughter of Time, you must wake. Fear not to gaze forward and walk the terrible path set before you. We are waiting.*'"

He paused and cleared his throat, his phrases cracking.

"These were his last words the day I handed him off to a life of slavery. I shrugged them off, thought them mad ravings, pushed them out of my mind. Then you came and my ambition blinded me to everything except your astounding gift. I did not hear his voice. Or *would* not hear it. Even as the prophecy returned this year to haunt my dreams." He shivered. "Now, I can't stop hearing them."

He cupped my head in his hands. I assumed he was also staring into my eyes to make an impression. Of course, I could see nothing.

"I want to say those words again. *Daughter of Time, you must wake. Fear not to gaze forward and walk the terrible path set before you.* Ambra, he meant *you*. He was a powerful Reader, and he forecast your coming. He *found* you in the fields of time. Listen to him. I can't undo what I've done, but I can do penance. Don't be afraid. *Survive*. It may be you are important beyond the hopes of humanity."

He exhaled, stood, and walked to the door. "My actions have

doomed me. They will make an example of my tampering. My final hours, my last minutes, I've spent giving this message to you."

Scurrying feet and raised voices grew from the hallway. Intermixed, I heard the chilling echoes of the voice translators. *They* were coming for us.

"Forgive what I have done and remember his words."

The door opened and slammed, the air pressure slapping my face. The swelling sounds outside spiked in intensity, an avalanche rushing my door.

I was going mad.

Chapter 11

A journey of a thousand miles started with a first step.

老子 Lǎozǐ (Lao Tzu)

When you first *see* as a Reader, you have no framework, nothing to connect with the singular sensations you develop. Your brain works the weird information into all its preexisting neurological patterns—images, ideas, emotions. Dreams are an arena to wrestle with these experiences as your subconscious decodes the strange data.

Soon after this, the new universe leaks into your waking mind. Visions become the product of this confusion. That's as far as most have gotten in human history—seers, prophets, lunatics. A supplementary sense organ in a minority of the population, stunted in its maturation. Granting a distinct sight but stealing sanity.

The irony? In all other things, we humans are the idiots of the Milky Way. We are the least evolved intelligence, life-forms others

consider backward and primitive. Beyond Earth, we're worms enabled by the aid of more advanced creatures.

In this universe, where we have so little to offer, our one value is in prescience. Our odd talent rivals, and often exceeds, the gifts of species far more developed in every other way. An accident of evolution making us the idiot savants of spacetime.

They harvested us through human farmers. Centers like mine in Nebraska selected those with potential. They handed us to fiends, who carted us across the galaxy. For breeding programs. Cloning attempts.

And, most of all, for the navships. Scattered about star systems and nebulae, entombed in oppressive and harsh prisons, humans serve the space-faring needs of many creatures that are otherwise disrespectful, contemptuous of our very existence and presence among them. We are a necessary evil.

With me, their pet humans got carried away, and before they realized, my captors had created an anomaly. A monster for all involved, human and *other*. Because, while I am certainly monstrous to my fellow Earthlings, my gift is a terrible threat to the galactic hegemony of the Dram—of them, you will hear more soon.

In me, the Reader organ is beyond developed. It has become my dominant sense, unfathomable even to the most powerful Readers of any species. I no longer can see the light of day, but I can see the energy of tomorrow and yesterday. I don't possess the words to paint for you the visions I experience. But I can say it isn't different in spirit from what I saw with my eyes: beauty, horror, and everywhere, *existence*.

As the ship plowed through the Earth's atmosphere, I was still, as far as my potential, very much asleep. A sleep that was, as I tried to explain, more psychological than anything else. I wasn't ready to accept what I was becoming or to grasp the power my unique insight offered to me. I would take that journey one clumsy step at

a time. But that time approached. The last words of the captured Reader lodged in my mind, buried like a bomb waiting to shake the galaxy.

I suppose a trip into space should be described with inspiring images. Breaking through the atmosphere! Encountering the first blackness and stars or the sunrise over the edge of the Earth. But mine was no pleasure cruise. For the children onboard, our hosts served claustrophobic chambers, turbulence, and near asphyxiation.

From the facility in the Midwest, they marched us down a long corridor into a vast hangar under the night sky. *Outside.* I hadn't been outside the gray walls of that glorified cage for years. The freshness of the air was a miracle. In the expanse of heaven above, the beautiful Milky Way glimmered. I gasped as wind walked along my skin again. The children stumbled forward with me to an existence where they would lose all that was familiar and loved.

The chamber rivaled a sports stadium. In the middle was a spaceship. Knowing more about these things now, I can say it was a surface transport, designed to ferry cargo planet-side from a starship. But at that moment, it was the first time I had seen anything like it, and it was overwhelming. The behemoth was as big as a tanker, shaped like a cross between a flying saucer and the space shuttle.

Doors to the building sealed shut behind us, the adults locked within. The earthsuited Sortax remained. A hundred children trembled before the monsters, their ark, and the fate awaiting above.

We crept quietly in our thin robes, fog escaping our lips in the winter chill. Several sobbed, and one or two broke down and refused to enter. The Sortax extended a dark rod towards the child, screams echoing. The awful translators ordered the crumpled shapes to move forward in line. After such pain, each did.

Inside the craft, it became clear how alien we were. The vessel was designed, of course, for its crew, the sea-dwelling Sortax visiting land with their many arms in water-filled suits. Liquid occupied most of the inner chambers. I marvel now at the compensation the Sortax must have used to offset the weight. There were airlocks ("waterlocks"?) of a kind for the natives (*Them*), that we bypassed without engaging. A short tunnel led to our holding pen. Once all the children had entered, our new masters sealed us off from the rest of the ship.

Sealed off from the rest of the ship.

That summarizes the interactions of humans with the diverse aliens that we encountered. Compatible environments were rare. Some species depended on liquid medium like the Sortax. Others required various gaseous environments. Often these gases were toxic or otherwise incompatible with our survival.

One ironic exception turned out to be the Dram, the Romans of our galaxy themselves, their planet located on the other side of the Milky Way. They evolved in an atmosphere with a similar oxygen and nitrogen content to Earth. The other were the Xix. They needed a small modification to an Earth-like atmosphere, which they achieved through a device worn around their necks in our presence. Well, if you could describe the Xix as having necks.

In most ships I was on, our captors walled us off in our own climate-controlled cells. *Controlled* was always a loose term. Conditions just slightly better than unsuitable for human survival were the norm. That was my impression when we entered our chamber on the Sortax ship, although I now realize their efforts exceeded those of many.

At the time, once the doors closed and we were at the mercy of their atmospheric system, it was oppressive. The air was acidic, burning our throats and eyes. It stank in an undefinable manner to our senses—alien and sickening. We sweltered in the noxious climate.

A single human waited inside. Her skin was gray, with cyan veins running like vines across her face and bare arms. Her hair was patchy and her eyes empty of expression. She motioned to the makeshift seats and straps, demonstrating their use without a word, placing herself within the restraints.

The rest of us gawked but moved to copy her motions as the walls rumbled. I'd just finished deciphering the buckles when the ship lurched into the sky. Several children, who were not prepared, flew to their deaths or serious injury. It made no sense. If they wanted us, why treat us like this and risk our lives? Some sort of demented natural selection for the best slaves? Or simply that they had a lot of meat they could grind through from Earth?

The ride to the starship was short. After a jarring docking (I bet such dockings weren't so bad for Sortax floating in water) and a long wait (likely for the Sortax to leave the ship and to pump out the liquid for our exit), our hatch opened. We peered through the space to see what awaited us.

Standing in the doorway were two Earthlings. Male, they wore thick, worn robes with strange markings across the back. They were perhaps in their twenties, although they looked older, drawn and poisoned like the woman who had ridden with us. As I was to learn, living under alien care was harsh. Lifespan was shorter than on Earth. Most of us did not live beyond forty years, and by the time we hit our thirties, we looked sixty.

Our silent stewardess limped past us to form a group of three adults. A moment of relief swept through the children. *Adults!* One of the men spoke, strangling that hope.

"No words," he barked. "You will do as you are told and prepare to serve the Sortax. This is a training vessel, and you will be instructed in guiding the navships to the Orb portals. Nothing else matters to your existence. If you cannot perform, you will be discarded. You are to report to us or other human shepherds. Under no circumstances are you to attempt any

contact with non-human residents of any ship. Follow us to your quarters."

The three turned, and retreated from the portal, leaving us stunned and empty. One by one, we stood and stretched our sore bodies, bounced by the trip through Earth's atmosphere. We drifted through the doorway to our new life.

Part II

I am become Time, the destroyer of worlds.

Bhagavad Gita

Chapter 12

To delve into the deepest mysteries of nature and discover the underlying truth has been denied us, but with the right imagination, a hypothesis may explain many phenomena.

Leonhard Euler

So my new life began. A life of military constraints, claustrophobic imprisonment, and protracted training periods. The most painful? The horrible separation from my homeworld and everything familiar.

Chronobiology failed us. In space, without night or day, without anything to mark time, existence staggered. Our circadian clock misfired. How much time since our abduction? How long had the navigation sessions lasted? The orderliness we took for granted and depended on vanished, and with it, all sense of normalcy. It paralyzed the psyche. Losing connections to Earth, its rhythms, its air, its life, many lost their sanity. The Sortax removed these victims, and they were never seen again.

It might have been the same with me. My being is tied to the soil and the seasons. In the metallic and sterile labs, I'd suffered for the disconnect from the land. You should remember, I'm a farmer's daughter. In the void, it was so much more terrible. But I had developed a unique relation to time and space. I saved myself again by exploring the past, finding echoes of Earth in visions.

Those who continued, in whatever ways we could, were kept busy adapting to the harsh conditions. We learned to swallow the disgusting material they dispensed to us as food. Function in the toxic air. Sleep on the cold metal shelves. Disregard privacy and cleanliness in an environment not designed to comfort human sensibilities.

Above all, we learned to pilot along the Strings that spread from the Orbs.

Through our training, we gleaned some kernel of explanation, the reason our Earth masters had taken us from our families. They had tortured us, trained us, tested us, honed our *other sense*, all to mold Readers into high-tech beasts of burden. Humanity's children bore the weight of an entire galactic civilization. Without us, interstellar travel would grind to a halt. Trade would wither. Star systems would starve. Our suffering, our terrible losses, it was all for the benefit of a culture that excluded and exploited us.

The first surprise came when the new headgear dropped over our eyes. Disco Ball 10.0. A laser lightshow labyrinth. Confusion and fear struck the other kids. But for me, I woke to a bright, sunlit city I had glimpsed only by moonlight.

Whatever these upgraded helmets did, they channeled the "stuff" of my vision. They brightened it with great contrast. Still limited to a certain color, so to speak, in a single dimension. It was beautiful in its way and yet tempted me with greater vistas to come. But within the monochromatic hues lay a skill we had to master, on penalty of death.

First came the simulations. A repetitive drill we experienced a hundred times. From a disembodied perspective, I would see myself approaching a complex sphere of light.

To call a real Orb a sphere is a criminal distortion. The word reflects the biased view of humans and aliens who cannot perceive the entity in fullness. Inside an Orb were endless layers entering independent dimensions beyond those we can discern. My mind's other sense could see in those hidden directions. The substructure dove deep into spacetime. The Orbs were more like infinite webs whose projection in three-space was a humble sphere. The simulations captured faint shadows. When we approached a true Orb, its beauty astounded me.

Our training was not focused on the Orbs themselves, but on the tendrils, the glowing Strings that spread from them. The Strings extending from an Orb traveled in many dimensions and were pregnant with possibilities. The sims reflected those limited to the visual directions. It was along those lines we were to direct the point of view (the ship in reality), when the time came to steer in earnest.

We spent weeks guiding little simulated spaceships onto the projections. One after the other in an endless parade. The galactic economy depended on this skill. The Strings served as shortcuts connecting any two Orbs. They cut the travel time between stars from eons to hours. I didn't understand how this happened or why these Orbs existed where they did. For the present, what mattered was perfecting the ability to help our masters navigate.

The aliens possessed the technology to exploit the Strings but not the capacity to peer into the spacetime matrices and plot a course. The starships required Readers for this. Readers came from many of the worlds connected by the Orbs. Or, increasingly, and far more cheaply, from the primitive world of Earth. Earthlings were bountiful in Reader potential and powerless to defend

themselves from the superior technological development of the creatures depending on our singular talent.

I adapted to the tasks without problem. My unique organ granted me advantages no other human or extraterrestrial possessed. Unlike the labs in my previous prison, my mastery did not bring me advancement or attention. It went unnoticed. This ate at me until I realized it was not individual humans guiding the navships, but the *collective*. Our average effort was being used by the aliens to guide the ship to the appropriate String. I guess it made sense. Individuals make mistakes. But averaged over the whole, the outliers, the errors, disappeared. The aim was true.

It was accurate, but slow, inefficient. Frustration set in as I participated. I was always sure how to direct the craft, but the group movement was stumbling molasses, bypassing the fastest routes through spacetime. But I was one of a horde, and no one understood my potential.

The Orbs distracted me from my frustrations. Soon they occupied all my attention. *So much complexity!* Far more interesting and inspiring than hitching rides on Strings. The sim Orbs displayed little of this. But as we progressed, we made more frequent approaches to the Orb in orbit between the asteroid belt and Jupiter.

Our Orb was resplendent, *incandescent* compared to the other objects in space. Our bright sun, a ball of radiant energy in the electromagnetic spectrum, was a dim and dull object in comparison. The Orb, no larger than a major Earth city in observable dimensions, shrouded a terrible and extended beauty. Within it a pregnant cosmic potential throbbed that longed to be reached, explored, and tapped.

I focused more on the Orbs than the purpose they had set for us. These close approaches were an opportunity, not to navigate, but to study, to peer behind the veil. I dove into that project. In

the Orbs, I imagined pathways, like trails in the woods, locked off by fortified gates of light. Roads to the past, the future, *elsewhere*. Was there a latch on the gate? I looked. More and more I looked.

Until one of the group leaders called me aside.

"Your scores have dropped. You must raise them or face elimination."

So they monitored the individual performances in the horde.

"What are the Orbs?" I dared to ask.

"They are a mystery. We do not approach them. We use the spacetime distortions they propagate to travel through hyperspace between them. Stick to your lessons, or you will face elimination."

He lumbered away like a robot, and I knew he meant what he said. As hard as it was, I tore my attention from the Orbs and back to the assigned task. Our initial group of over one hundred now counted less than twenty. Attrition from madness, illness, and poor performance took its toll. But performance improved. The paths to the dynamic tendrils, while not optimal, cut a lean route through spacetime.

As we approached the Earth-Orb for the last time, the Sortax instructed us to guide to a particular String. As we did, a power surge rattled through the walls. We held our course and neared the String. The spacecraft entered its flow.

How did this appear to the human eye? Unremarkable, I would guess. Vision responds to such a limited band of electromagnetic radiation. The Orb and Strings would be plain and dim, the starship suspended in the emptiness of space. The craft would accelerate, vanishing to a point as it exited perceptible dimensions. Odd, no doubt, but bland.

My "eyes" transfigured the process. In the bright and glowing stream of the String, radiance diffused through all materials and structures. A churning river of luminescence bubbled like rocky rapids. The glow mesmerized me, put me in a trance.

Time Turbines engaged in a gleaming swirl, whirling us down a cosmic bathtub drain. A strange sensation tugged my innards and turned my body inside out. My mind drowned in showers of complex patterns of resplendence and twilight.

Infinity erupted and strobed over me. We plunged through hyperspace toward a distant world.

Chapter 13

It is unnatural in a large field to have only one shaft of wheat, and in the infinite Universe only one living world.

Metrodorus of Chios, 4th century BC

I should explain how it was I became able to "see" surrounding events. My descriptions to come all depend on this ability I tapped into on Earth during my first meeting with the Sortax. Our inaugural hyperspace journey was to their homeworld, and over Sortax seas, this skill reawakened. This time, I recognized what I was doing and began to control it.

The potential to visit the past, providing me with education and refuge, offered something else immediate and practical—the power to form images of my environment. My mind weaved my sixth sense into visual metaphors from memories of my lost sight.

These are what *visions* are for a Reader, the blending of our unique sensory impressions with imagination. It's a painting to help us understand the incomprehensible. Perhaps if we had developed the ability to Read as infants, we could do without a substi-

tute. We would "see" in this new way just as we see with our eyes or smell with our noses. We wouldn't need to frame the experience with another sense. But our abilities activate near puberty, when much of our brain is set and less plastic than it once was.

Initially, I used this power to make discoveries I could not have known any other way. The further from my own background, the harder it was to "see," as if strange subjects were at a greater distance. Naturally, many of my greatest interests were very far away. "Seeing" the details of the unfamiliar required great concentration, and I had to practice discerning histories at such distances in any useful manner.

The significance of events near in time, those things easy to perceive, I had failed to comprehend. I'd ignored them. Why? I considered them obvious, and early on part of the world I was seeking to escape emotionally.

Then the Sortax came to Earth. In the panic and dread of the deeply alien, my survival instincts focused my awareness. My other sight concentrated on moments of the immediate past and close to me physically. Reading the proximal present is hardly different from *seeing* the present. As a bonus, I had the flexibility to see beyond the limits of eyesight. Spacetime allowed me to explore with wider vision.

And so it was and became again as we descended through the turbulent atmosphere of the Sortax homeworld. My mind converged on the imminent present, and at last, I understood what I was doing. This ability freed me from blindness and granted me an exceptional sight. It was also the launching point for the next steps of my development—the exploration of the near future and the much harder and powerful search for major events to come.

Once through the clouds, the vastness of the planet inundated me. Three times the size of Earth, the globe's expanse glinted with a sheen from purple water. A descending orbit traversing two-thirds of the circumference of the world and no sign of land. Not a small island or ice cap. There would be nothing to "land" on. These aliens lived beneath the waves, and under them we would be going.

The starship arced and made a swift dive toward the violet seas. Impact with the surface jarred my teeth. The howling atmospheric sounds ended, replaced with a churning liquid outside the walls of the vessel. Our chairs shuddered. Metal pinged and groaned as we plunged deeper into their endless ocean. How could creatures like us of fragile flesh, bone, and gas survive at the depth and pressures of their underwater cities?

After what crawled like hours, the ship, now more a submarine, stopped descending, slowed, and the metallic clang of docking rang. The terrified breathing of those nearby hissed in the air. Once again, we were alone and powerless, heading into the unknown. But this time, I was less afraid. What could be worse than what had happened to us so far?

A question reserved for the dangerously naive.

The door to our chamber opened, and our human shepherds gestured to follow. The Sortax must have exited through another location, one designed for their underwater lifestyle. Our exit was under atmosphere, and we were not given any suits to put on. The ship had docked with a corridor leading deep into the recesses of a submerged city.

We stumbled down the tunnel and through many sculptured chambers in unexpected Earth-like conditions. The construction was immaculate. Beautiful in some disturbing manner. I tried to wrap my head around why these aliens had gone to so much trouble for their captive humans. All for us. How naive I was.

"Into the examination room," barked one of the shepherds, as he pointed to a large room to our right.

The architecture inside was unlike anything a human mind could have concocted. The walls and supports undulated as they curved toward the domed ceilings. The material was a metal blend with stone never seen on Earth. It glowed a pale green. Illumination diffused from a moss-like ingredient embedded in all surfaces. The floor was of a similar substance. It was slippery and several children fell.

As we entered the chamber, we had our introduction to the Dram. Tall, insectile soldiers glared, their hateful images matching those from my earlier vision. Standing at attention beside large pieces of machinery, they toted adorned cylinders. Despite the alien composition, the devices telegraphed weaponry. Less militarized bugs, marked with indecipherable symbols on their thorax-like regions, crouched, adjusting elements of the equipment.

One by one, the towering creatures led us to these clusters. They stripped us and shoved us onto a square region in the center of the apparatus. Immobilized, they poked and prodded us in every orifice. They tore skin, hair, blood, saliva, and mucus samples from our bodies. Techs pushed gadgets over different parts of our anatomy. All the while, we lay helpless and terrified as the enormous insects appeared ready to dissect us on the spot.

As they removed my clothes, I did not resist them. But I held on to the one thing that mattered to me—the Red Sox hat. I balled it in my fists, clenching them, willing to suffer whatever might come if they tried to take it away. Lucky for me, they didn't focus on the crushed clothing in my palm. They were too busy removing all possible dignity from the rest of me.

In all the turmoil, I was unable to recognize a startling fact—the bugs were breathing the same air we were. They were comfortable at our pressures and temperatures. If I had noticed, I would have pieced together that these chambers were not for us at all.

Only the clinging vestiges of naivety allowed me to believe such an absurdity. No, this enclosure beneath the Sortax ocean was sculpted long before to comfort the Dram.

As they finished with me, a probe came out from the side of the examination equipment. A Dram worker rolled me so my back faced the device, and a searing burn stabbed my skin. I cried out as others had but couldn't move as the sharp ends of the worker's many arms held me in place. I'd learn later about the chip. Inserted into my body, it contained all the relevant data for those who would be shopping for Earth's Readers—my training certification, physiological profile, estimated age, and expiration date.

They marched us into a second chamber I can only describe as a human meat market. One by one, they dropped us on a bare stage to be displayed in complete humiliation—alone, naked, cold, and afraid. Devices resembling odd cameras whirled about us. A device would also scan the gadget in our backs, all the information transmitted to the bidding aliens who needed Reader services.

Based on a weighted formula of many of our traits, we were each given a score. Those with the highest rankings served in pleasure craft of the rich, governmental ships, or military vessels. Lower values meant passenger freighters. Or worse—the wild and cheap auction market that attracted a number of despicable bidders. My blindness and deformity didn't do wonders for my rating. They had no inkling of my gifts, no means by which to assess them. I was bottom of the barrel.

Afterward, a robotic drone pushed me down several corridors and into a storage room. Awkward English orders instructed me to get inside a small, coffin-like container. These packaged the children for delivery to their new masters.

And my owners? Some of the vilest criminals of the space-faring races. Their cold cruelty almost killed me. Worse still, through all they did to us, my spirit shattered. This will be the

hardest part for me to tell you. Even now, distant in time and space from the events, I become dizzy and sick just thinking about it.

I shivered in the coffin. My breath fogged, and a foam spread over my body, injected from the sides of the pod. It weighed like lead, and I struggled to move as it covered me. It was *cold*. Ice-cold and burning.

I panicked but gave way to calm. My shivering slowed. My eyes blinked, refusing to stay open, and I yawned. Sleep—heavy, deep drowsiness descended on me like an enormous blanket, blocking out the claustrophobia and fear. I forgot where I was. Light faded as I squeezed the crumpled baseball cap in my numbing right hand.

Chapter 14

The whole visible world is only an imperceptible atom in the ample bosom of nature. It is an infinite sphere, the center of which is everywhere, the circumference nowhere.

Blaise Pascal

Somehow in artificial sleep, I dreamed.

I floated in space. Not in a ship or spacesuit, but without constraint, like a child coasting in water. An impossible wind swept my hair backwards with molecules of air that could not exist in this emptiness.

I felt no cold despite the fact that it should have been absolute zero. The gas in my lungs did not rush out into the vacuum, and the saliva in my mouth didn't boil. Nitrogen didn't bubble in my blood, giving me the bends, nor did my eardrums rupture. In the absence of oxygen, I didn't get dizzy or pass out. I was comfortable. Free.

Was I dead? Was this my spirit?

I looked around. A yellow star shone at a distance. Staring at it

without the filtering of atmosphere or protective glasses, my eyes were unhurt. The intense radiation had no effect on my china-white skin.

Our sun. Our home star. I marveled that I could see. Not *Reading* the near past, but *seeing*.

In front of me flickered a point of light. Like a magnet, it pulled at me, and my body accelerated. The object grew in my field of vision. A small, pale coin. A plate. A pocked surface blotting out the inky blackness.

The moon.

My rate of approach slowed as the beige disk filled my range of sight.

An unease festered in my stomach. A chill of foreboding, danger, and evil lurking on the other side of the satellite. Something wrong, something monstrous was hiding behind our moon, something malignant and murderous. I felt it searching, seeking, trying to peer around the dead ball of rock.

Searching for me.

I knew it was close, but I could hear voices from that direction as well. Cries begging in panic and pain. Shouts mixing together, like some nightmare chorus, rising in crescendo and sweeping over me like a tempestuous sea.

And in one dreadful instant, silenced.

What had it done? *What had the monster done?* Distress overcame my fear. I rocketed toward the other side of the moon. The lunar surface blurred past, my eyes focused on the horizon where I would see the bright blue of Earthrise. Soon, any moment now, I would see home and find my way to the cries for help. I could hear them echoing in my mind.

They called my name.

Chapter 15

When I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.

Anne Frank

Waking from hibernation, the smells struck me. Human odors, not alien. Foul waste and rot. Sickness and decay. The reek of filth from a hundred bodies malnourished, unwashed, and weakened with illness and despair.

Right after this stomach-churning stink, small robots yanked us from the pods. They herded us through the entry port into a larger chamber.

Horror. Skeletal forms crouched, their translucent skin pocked and infected. The stench waxed and choked me. Bile climbed in my throat, and I stifled a reflex to retch. A feeble few with energy glanced our way. Revulsion paralyzed my gaze, locking to the hollow sockets of their eyes.

The sickly shadows didn't speak. Standing idly or sitting list-

lessly, voiceless, bent as with great age, these zombies were rotting cattle in pens. Dumb eyes stared unseeing. Their hair was matted, filthy, thinning and falling out. Sores festered on their legs and buttocks, all too visible through torn and frayed cloth. In some cases, they lacked any covering at all. This fiendish boat had emptied the walking corpses of dignity, self-awareness, hope. The victims putrefied, broken and dying.

I shuddered. Death here was a release, a door away from suffering. My soul screamed in silence. *What could have done this to them?* I placed the Red Sox cap over my head and pulled the bill down over my eyes. I couldn't face these shambling horrors.

I had no idea where I was. After the Sortax homeworld, the exams, the market, and the pod, I had slept. *For how long?* It could have been days or years—no way for me to tell. Where had they sent me? Why? Questions burned in my mind, but in this purgatory, I found no answers.

The robots herded us to the far wall. Small depressions in the floor indicated where to stand. If we didn't understand, the metallic hounds shoved us into position. A loud crash above our heads startled me. I glanced up to see a panel slide open, revealing a metal grappler snaking down toward me.

People screamed. Some tried to run. The bots showed they had a bite to accompany their bark. Dashing, they zapped anyone out of place with a painful jolt of blue electricity. The electric dogs repeated the shocks until we were properly herded. Meanwhile, the claw had descended and clamped those of us remaining. The tentacled appendages writhed with one hundred joints, squeezing like a boa.

Once we were all loaded in the claws, they raised us into a tube above. Like a piece in an assembly line, we were sped along several tubes by the robotic arm, up, sideways, down. It dropped me into a hard, wet seat, restraints snapping over my legs and arms.

Rows of others to my right and left were in identical positions.

A syringe with a large needle emerged from a small panel beside me, and before I could react, it pierced my thigh and injected its contents. To this day, I don't know what was in it. I assume some combination of antibiotics, vitamins, and steroids—something to keep us functioning as long as possible in the hellish conditions.

Beneath me, the stench of urine and feces fermented. A hole was centered in the seat they had strapped me into. You can guess what it was for. I hoped the wetness underneath me was cleaning fluid. We worked protracted shifts before the claw brought us back to the holding pens where we tried to sleep. Nature would call.

We were also fed at these stations. A trough in front of us would fill periodically with a green sludge for our consumption. We had to bend forward and slurp the stuff with our mouths, our arms and legs clamped to the side. At first, the rancid smell prevented me from eating. But after two days, the filth tasted heavenly to my starving body.

The needles withdrew. Cries and whimpers tumbled across the rows of children, but they allowed us no time to process. The navigation helmets descended and plugged us into their system. It was like the training sessions, almost the same interface for our minds.

We first navigated through a series of simulated journeys through hyperspace. The crew was not going to take chances on us guiding them through a star or asteroid field. They had lessons to teach, as well, harsh ones. For those who didn't match the proper trajectories, our caretakers dispensed electricity from the seat. A few in our group screamed on the first run, the pain so terrible tears pooled in the eyes of a girl next to me. Mentally, a projection from the helmets outlined the correct path. We were supposed to learn and try again.

In little time, the newcomers had learned, and the punishments and screams stopped. These lessons never ended. Anyone

underperforming could expect a shock. Later on, as our physical and mental state deteriorated in this nightmare, our performances dropped. Some lost all ability, and when shocks did not work, the claw descended and removed the offender. We never saw them again.

After the initial tests and reprimands, the crew brought us online for the first hyperjump. Again, the beautiful Orb enlightened our space. I would encounter them over and over in the coming months, jump after jump. As life and hope bled out of me, each appearance of an Orb was transformative. I came to view them as the sole purity in a filthy cosmos.

We directed the ship to the specified course. The tug and inversion of the traversal passed through me. We journeyed.

Repeat everything I've told you about this place until the events blur, and you have a good idea of our quality of life. Our time was a distended monotony of suffering. We never glimpsed any of our destinations. We guided the String leaps, waited in position for docking, heard and felt the loud noises of cargo transfer, and prepped for the next jump. This would happen perhaps every hour, giving us ten or twelve jumps per shift.

For most, it was exhausting concentrating under the pressure of pain to guide the ships. At first, I found it simple. Later, as my body crumbled, it became a challenge even for me to focus on the task. At that point, all of those in the group who had come on board with me had disappeared. They couldn't pilot anymore. They were replaced.

I would learn from the Xix that I'd landed in a smuggler ship. Such vessels were part of an underground black market of traders often enslaving human Readers as disposable tools. These smugglers jumped ceaselessly, maximizing transfers, minimizing downtime, and mercilessly running through humans like some obscene organic fuel to power their business. It was illegal, but tolerated by many local authorities. Most aliens considered us a low form of

life. They judged us to possess poor self-awareness, unable to suffer like the more advanced life-forms. That's how they rationalized away our exploitation and pain. Wealth mattered more.

I still cannot reconcile the conflicting perspectives. One, the injustices presented in an academic fashion by the Xix and others, an economic truth of an unfortunate nature. And two, the minute-to-minute torture of the hell I lived through. Those descriptions could not possibly be different ways of looking at the same thing. They were from two incompatible universes.

In my current life, I choose not to think of it, because I feel madness lurking in trying to harmonize those incongruent truths. Telling you now is harder than you can imagine. But it has to be done. It's part of the big picture, your understanding the truth. My pain in reliving this nightmare is small compared to the catastrophe you must help us reverse.

After our long shifts, the claw descended and carried us like used baggage to one of several crowded rooms. These holding pens consisted of cold, hard walls and floors. No comforts, no divisions for privacy, no separated areas to take care of bodily functions, no space for a human being to have any sense except for a festering claustrophobia.

We packed ourselves together, shivering, choking on the poisonous air, lying in our own excrement, trying to find some short period of sleep before the next shift. During this time, we went without food. The robots targeted anyone who dared act out. Plenty could not adapt. Some turned violent. Some became catatonic. Both were removed, never to be seen again.

This author's words offend me. They are a sin of blundering prose. His bland efforts won't help you smell the stench, endure the oppression of our senses, the fear of smothering in others' awful bodies or the unclean conditions. No matter how many times I force him to rewrite this, he fails to convey the ghastliness. You won't understand how this state of existence robbed me of

my sense of self, my ability to think or feel or remember life on our beautiful planet.

The horror alone was real. All else faded to a dream—fresh air, green grass, blue skies, smiling faces. And hope. Hope died in this place. Dreams dissolved. Faith was a cruel delusion to torment me with beauty and kindness and freedom I could never have. Reality was nightmarish, a plane of Hades, and we were the tortured souls never again to deserve decency.

Every few days, our captors flooded the room with a freezing blast of water. It left abrasions on our skin, but for a short while, it washed the filth out of the way. The liquid burned our throats and noses, filled no doubt with disinfectants. Our owners used such coarse methods to keep us healthy. Sanitizing washes. Injections of antibiotics. As long as was possible to squeeze value from our veins.

But they would not care for us as individuals, and these stopgaps failed us, one after the other, depending on our constitution and luck. Each of us succumbed to pathogens we had carried with us from Earth. Our weakened immune systems fell behind. Skin sores and boils, respiratory diseases, and the ever-present diarrhea brought us down. Some labored on, drawing from some well of infinite willpower, dragging their skeletal forms forward, coughing blood, *trying*. Others reached a point at which life ceased to matter, and they lay down and refused to do more. They were removed.

"Nights" were the worst part of it, if you can identify a period as day or night in a place with no sun, unchanging illumination, no rhythm but work and collapse. We were fish in a can, squashed together in filth, hearing the moans of the sick, the weeping of the broken. Their hopelessness was more infectious than anything else. We found no peace, no rest. I longed for the navigation hours.

And so it went. Hour after hour, day after day. Weeks blurred in my mind. I couldn't keep a count of time. My body withered.

I spent painful sessions with intestinal illnesses that made me want to die. My torso echoed an anatomy chart, my ribs and pelvic bones jutting from my sides. My clothes were an unwashed, raggedy set of strips covering nothing I normally would have cared to cover.

Ricky's hat was still on my head, but it was wrinkled, torn, stained beyond salvage in this awful place. By this point, I didn't care. My eyes had taken on the haunted stare of the creatures I'd seen when I first entered the spaceship. Broken souls for whom death is a welcomed mercy.

I had lost the ability, the desire, to travel into the past. I'd forgotten anything to do with the future. I was a stumbling zombie, performing in the seats or facing pain. I swallowed as much of the foul gunk as I could without puking. I dreaded feverish nights in the holding pens.

Hanging on by this thin thread, I stumbled onto a truth. And it broke my spirit.

I leaned over the trough, slurping the green sludge. A woman next to me was crying. I ignored her. Most of us who had been there more than a few weeks withdrew from emotional and social bonds. We became empty, numb to everything around us except immediate and sharp concerns.

The woman was gawking at me, wailing. She hollered. She called me a monster. Her voice grated, and I turned to her. She was a new addition, acquired at one of the recent stops, tanned, with her clothes intact. Her theatrical outburst indicated she wouldn't last long. This place would waste no time breaking her.

"How can you? How can you eat that? What have they done to you?" she screeched at me as the putrid porridge leaked down the sides of my chin.

I angled my head and stared at what she was pointing toward. The blur of green food cleared as my eyes focused, and there, in the midst of the awful glop, was a severed human finger. It had the

same greenish hue as the ground meat. A human finger, clear as it could be. I glanced back at her, not yet able to process what my eyes had seen.

"Don't you even care?" she moaned. "Oh, God, you're eating each other!"

Understanding spread through me like venom. In all the horrid events, through every indecency and injustice committed against us, I had been detached, a tortured innocent caught in the monstrosity of others. Now, tasting that sludge in my mouth, perceiving what coated my chin and lips, *I* became a monster. For the first time in my life, I felt tainted, evil. As if the devil had transfused my blood with that of a hundred aborted fetuses. I was eating my own kind.

I threw up, vomiting over the trough. For the first time since I had come to this place, I wept. *Were my insides melting?* My sense of self dissolved. I had become a disease.

I spoke nonsense to the woman. "I'm sorry," I moaned. "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

But she cursed at me more, and at everyone in the row. She condemned us to hell for our actions. Her judgments were like cold water. My sobs ceased. It was all so clear. The poor woman, she was so lost. She didn't understand that we were already in hell.

I stopped eating. I couldn't clean myself of the stain, but I could stop the debasement. But let me tell you, it was the most difficult thing I've done in my life. All I went through, and all I would go through—tortures, cruelties, sacrifices—none of them compared to the trial of simply not swallowing that inhuman, human muck.

If you have never starved, you can't hope to comprehend. I would lean toward the porridge, weeping, wanting to bring it to my mouth, my flesh howling at me, demanding nourishment, saliva dripping. Somehow, I stopped myself. Somehow, *a madness*,

I forced myself to abstain again and again. I separated from my body, my thoughts floating above it, guiding its actions remotely.

But it was not a triumph. Don't ever believe it was. Because I *wanted* that food. I wanted that hideous gruel more than anything I had wanted in my life or have wanted since. I managed because of my terrible need to regain my humanity, whatever remained of it. Like some dishonored samurai plunging a blade into his abdomen, I punished myself. But even today, I can still feel the deranged lust for it coursing through my guts, and the memory dirties me.

Little time was left for me now. Each hour, I grew weaker. After three days, I couldn't focus on the navigation and slept little at night for the pangs of hunger in my belly. I am sure I would have failed the fourth day. The chair would have disciplined me. The claw would remove me once and for all to be processed myself into the green slop.

But on the fourth day, the Xix came.

Chapter 16

The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.

attributed to Gandhi

If you were to cross an iridescent, elongated tree stump with a spindly-armed alien from early science-fiction films, add sixfold radial body symmetry, three layers of appendages, and throw in a large dose of quirky, ballerina-like elegance, you might get something close to the impression a typical Xixian specimen would give.

But focusing on their alienness is wrong. You would miss the heart of these noble creatures. I hope in the chapters that follow, I can show you.

When I first encountered the Xix, you must imagine me to be broken. An empty shell of Ambra Dawn. I was a dying and wasted thing, starving, skeletal, my gums bleeding, sores all over my body. I no longer cared to live. My brain ignored most of the surrounding reality.

The demon ship holding us in torment had docked with the usual sounds of cargo transfer. But an unusual racket erupted over the expected routine. *Perhaps I heard explosions*? My mind treaded water. The lights flickered with a subsonic bass drop to silence. Distant footsteps approached outside our entry port. Metal clanged against our door. With a loud crash, it flew outward.

The elongated Xixians danced inside, odd devices suspended in one of their many arms. They wore robes stitched together at several points along the angular contours of their bodies. The clothes were dark blue with insignia and characters I couldn't decipher. Their iridescent skin contrasted with the solid hues of their clothing.

Of all the aliens I encountered, the Xix presented one of the greatest contrasts between physical appearance and spiritual reality. Superficially, they were deranging nightmares. Three layers of appendages decorated a barrel-like midsection tapering like a cone. At the bottom were six legs, thick and muscled, ending in six-toed "feet." In the middle of the torso were six, six-fingered "arms." A final layer of extremities extended near the top of the cone. These top arms were delicate, sporting radially symmetric hands. Twelve elongated fingers of six joints undulated from them like tentacles.

The small, upper hands held the odd spherical devices, like weapons.

All the limbs were multi-jointed, supported by alien sinew and elements bizarre to human physiology. Were an Earth creature to bend in several directions simultaneously, attempting to support weight at those absurd and dangerous-looking angles, the bones would snap and the ligaments tear. The Xix tolerated those ridiculous bends, hopping to a strange rhythm in their gait.

The top of the conical torso splayed outward with three sets of six eyestalks. This was what I thought of as the "head." The flexibility of the eyes allowed the aliens to see well from all directions. Membranes spanned the thick and mobile eyes, with no mass for a

brain. Their thinking organ rested in the center of their large, barrel chests.

These disturbing extraterrestrials stormed into the holding pen where I lay dying. Scanning the area, they replaced their weapons with small communicators. Instinct drew us back from the creatures, monsters to the human psyche. Two Xixians entered, dressed in different uniforms—lighter blue, with distinct insignias. They sported a form of the "universal translator" worn by other species, like the Dram and Sortax. Much sleeker in appearance, they also functioned as a gas regulator to modify their inhalation. Words spilled from the devices. Clear speech. Voices that sounded human.

The first language was Chinese. Several in our room glanced toward the invading aliens. I heard other tongues spoken, all of Earth, not alien. Although unintelligible, they were sounds that touched my heart. Sounds from home. In the middle of this babble, I caught phrases in English.

"Please be calm. We are here to help you. We are representatives of the Xixian Federation, charged with Life Rights for creatures in this parsec. You have been illegal prisoners aboard this vessel. We will take you to better quarters and provide you with health services. Afterward, we will aid you in finding appropriate and safe work within the Hegemony. Again, do not be afraid. We are here to assist you. We are a rescue party."

No one moved. We were beyond the ability to process our environment. We gawked at our saviors. Teams of Xix in green uniforms—the medical crew—rushed in through the door and attended to the worst of us. Light-blue-uniformed nightmares approached others. They gathered the cowering people together with gentle voices and shepherded them outside. *How loving they were!* If any meaningful map could be drawn between human empathy and the alien psychology, I would say the Xix *felt our*

pain. They cared for us. My long association with them hasn't changed my impression.

At the time, however, I could no longer stand. The many-fingered yet delicate hands of two Xixian medics lifted me onto a hovering stretcher. Bobbing in my delirium, a head writhing with eyestalks snaked over and examined me. Nightmarish hands passed a strange, glowing device over my wrecked form. A warmth washed through me. My suffering faded. I slid into a deep well of darkness.

Chapter 17

For after all, what is man in nature? A nothing in relation to infinity, all in relation to nothing, a central point between nothing and all and infinitely far from understanding either. The ends of things and their beginnings are impregnably concealed from him in an impenetrable secret.

Blaise Pascal

Again, I dreamed.

I floated through the black of space, a small point of light growing in the distance. Larger and larger, it took on the dimensions of a disk. A great pocked disk of rock rushed toward my disembodied perspective.

The moon.

I did not recognize the surface. It was the moon, but not the one I knew, with craters and lines of patterns strange. It sped past, occluding my vision. The bright blue and white of the Earth peered over the edge of its satellite and the motion slowed to a

stop. Hanging over the gray horizon was half a glorious marble set in the black of space.

Home.

I wept, but without a body, no tears fell. My perspective gained momentum, revolving around the moon, the Earth dipping below sight.

Earthset.

Not enough. I had to see it again. I rocketed toward the other side of the moon. I strained for a glimpse of the living disk breaking out over the lifeless surface.

Earthrise.

I swooped over the landscape, the dark side of the moon giving way to the patterns I knew. I continued, racing in orbit and still the planet did not break over the horizon. *Where was it?* How far did I have to go to catch it once more? I needed to go home.

Around and again, peering, stretching. A cold chill passed through me. The familiar presence of something terrible and wrong haunted the heavens. The monster was near.

I had to find the Earth! I cast my vision across space, straining for a glimpse beyond the moon and this blackness.

Hideous laughter echoed. Long and cruel. It pierced my spirit, a poisoned sleet storm, reverberating in the infinite darkness.

And I *knew*. A knife in my gut.

I screamed in the silence. My rush over the moon increased, spinning faster and faster. Patterns of the surface repeated, again and again. Above, darkness drowned me.

Only the moon.

Panic crested. I would stretch until I snapped. Around and around until the surface blurred.

The Earth was gone!

Chapter 18

You were born with wings. Why prefer to crawl through life?

Rumi

I woke in a soft bed, stiff, like I'd slept for a time uncounted. I opened my eyes, but like the dream, all was dark. Fear gripped my throat before I remembered—*I'm blind*. Calming myself, I made an effort and scanned the immediate past. From the black nothing, I summoned visions and painted my location within my mind.

I was in a small room. A warm light shone like an early spring morning on my face. Not the sun, but a lamp overhead, casting Earth-like tones on objects nearby. I lay on an oversized bed, blankets of a strange weaving draped over me. Next to my head was a blue and red artifact. Something had stretched and stained the fabric. Stitched lettering ran across the front above a bent bill. Someone, or some*thing*, had made the effort to clean it.

Two broad and odd chairs cast shadows over my feet. In each chair sat a monstrosity. As my mind cleared, my memory creeped

back. Images from the death ship flipped my stomach. But I remembered. At the last, when my strength had failed, the entrance of the strange aliens. The Xix.

Our salvation.

Little glimpses popped into my awareness. Half-recalled dreams where I'd awakened and lost consciousness. I had been in several places, attended to by these creatures. But no other details emerged.

Where am I?

Two tall Xixians, green robes covering their unusual bodies, waited in front of me. Their snaking eyestalks and fingers squirmed as the rest of their bodies sat immobile. The first fear of them dissipated. Somehow, I knew they meant me no harm. They had rescued what was left of us from that ship. They had cared for me. *Why*, I didn't have a clue. Anxiety still remained for what they might want with me.

"Welcome back, Ambra Dawn," said one of them before I could muster any courage for interaction. Its translator was strung about its strange cone like a necklace, lights flashing across the surface as words sang. "Please, do not be afraid. We are medics of the Xix. We have tended to you since our forces retrieved you from the smugglers."

"Smugglers?" I managed. My throat was a raw wound.

"Barbarians," spoke the other in an identical pitch, identical accent. But a different personality came through the cadenced inflection of the phrases.

"You were nearly beyond our aid. Many of your companions already were," continued the first.

"Where are they all?" I whispered, terrified of the answer.

"Those that survived are well cared for at a rehabilitation facility."

"Rehabilitation?"

"Yes. We are a division of Xixian forces with a specific mission.

Devoted to identifying groups that violate the laws in place ensuring the proper treatment of underdeveloped creatures. Too often more advanced species abuse their power. They resort to treating humans in unconscionable ways to maximize profit. Too many do not believe in your ability to suffer, or do not care. Our job is to police such abuses. We are caring for your shipmates. They will be assigned to more, shall we say, humane employments."

My mind attached a soft smile to the words. Of course, the Xix had no teeth or mouths I ever spied. They never dined with us, and it was always my theory they absorbed their food through their rough skin. I was clueless about how they interfaced with the translators.

"Why am I here?"

The eyestalks swiveled around and settled on me. "Because you are special, Ambra."

"How do you know my name?"

"You have spoken much in your delirium. We have been careful to record and study everything about you. Once we understood your value." A short silence followed. "After we tended you, our scans of your body identified items of interest. Physical elements far beyond the illnesses and damage that we sought to repair."

"My tumor."

"Yes. But I don't think you appreciate your condition."

"I hate it."

"That is understandable. We often hate things we do not understand."

The second one spoke, its mass of eyes dividing its attention between me and the other Xix. "Who modified you? Was it Earthlings? Or others?"

"Modified me? Oh. You mean the surgeries." I turned away

from them. The shame was too much. “Humans did it. They wanted it to grow. I think my powers come from it.”

“They do, Ambra. Did you know many of your species have such tumors?”

I flipped back to face them. “They do?”

“All mammals from your planet endowed with Reader capacity have this growth in the brain. In primates, it has undergone an extensive reorganization, a unique neural physiology evolving within the last two hundred thousand of your Earth years. In most, it is no larger than the tip of your finger.”

“But in me?”

“Your genetics combined to create a benign polyp in this tissue. Puberty accelerated its development. The surgeries modified your neuronal matrix, your skull, the local vasculature. All to allow the cyst to grow uninhibited. It gives you special abilities.”

“I don’t want to be special.”

“But you are, Ambra.”

I angled away again. In the quiet, I could hear the odd gurgling of the alien bodies. I suppressed a shudder.

The first Xix continued the conversation. “We know you are blind.”

“Yes.”

“Our scans also revealed the damage from the growth of your prescient organ. Primarily to your tissues involved in processing visual information.” Another long stillness. “And yet, Earthling, you see.”

I remained silent, hiding my face and refusing to engage. What was there to say? Most of the talk had been from the first speaker. The second leaned forward. Its eyestalks caused shadows to move over my form like dancing snakes.

“I, too, am a Reader. We exist in many of the alien species in the Dram Hegemony. But our talents are weak compared to

humans. And compared to you—there has never been a Reader like you, Ambra."

"The man who did this to me said there was. He said another predicted me."

This time, a longer pause. The Xixian Reader continued. "We will not speak of this right now. But what you say is true. But you have the potential to far surpass anything he has done."

My head was swimming. Already fatigue was dragging my body to sleep. *What did they want with me?*

The first one spoke again. "How is it you are blind and yet you see?"

I shook my head. How was I going to explain all this? I couldn't explain it to myself. My trips to the past—were they real? Was I mad? Did I really *see?* Or did I imagine? After everything—kidnapping, parents slaughtered, surgeries, aliens, auctioned, cannibalism. How could I know I wasn't insane? And if I hadn't lost my mind, did I have words to make sense of it?

"I...I look at what was...*before*. I can look and see histories, many that have been. It's a web or weaving, dancing in my thoughts...no, I don't know, I can't explain it. Things far and close. If I look at stuff near me, I can watch what has happened, which is like seeing what is now. Kind of. That's what it is for me."

The two were silent, their eyestalks darting about each other. I guess it's what I would say was a "knowing look" for these creatures. Something passed between them.

The Reader spoke. "Ambra, you may call me Thel. I am assigned to you. There is much we would like to know. We need to know what you can see."

"Why?! What do you *want* with me?" I'd had enough. The fatigue, helplessness, questions, strangeness. I shouted, "Just leave me alone! I don't want this anymore. *Please*...please. Can't you just take me home?"

Thel's voice lilted. "I'm sorry. But we can't."

Tears ran down my face and I hugged my knees, rocking.

"For your pain, we would. But you understand so little."

"What? What don't I understand?" I sobbed between breaths.

"Your planet is not safe for you. It is not what you think it is. You have explored the past, but not thoroughly. Or you would have seen that, several hundred years ago, Dram agents had infiltrated Earth. In humans, they found gold — herds with unprecedented Reader potential. They subverted your cultures, your nations, and guided the development of your civilization. All with the purpose of breeding, identifying, and selecting members of your kind with the greatest powers. There is no place left where their influence does not extend. Should you return to your homeworld, very soon you would be back in their hands."

"Like I'm in *your* hands?"

"We believe we are different."

"Prove it. Let me go. Take me back!"

"We would not wish to debase you as others would. But we *need* you. Not only the Xix, but many alien species do. And your own race needs you, too. Quite desperately."

"How could I help anyone?"

"The Hegemony has strangled our galaxy for too long. There are those underneath their rule seeking what you would call liberation. You can serve those resisting this tyranny. Only when we defeat the Dram, can they be removed from Earth. Only then can your world be free. Nothing on your homeworld is as it seems. You are not in control of your destiny. You are puppets on strings. Cattle bred, raised, and taken for one purpose—slavery."

I startled, a shiver running through me. Have you ever had a sudden taste of truth, finally glimpsed the sword hanging over you? Hearing those words, a thousand facts fit together—the searches through the past, my life experiences, the Xixian descriptions. A landscape cleared through a puzzled fog. And I *knew*. The pieces fell into place.

I had felt it all my life, this *wrongness* of our life on Earth. The incongruity, the mismatch between my inner sense and how our world appeared. The deep dread that something—something darker—lay behind it, blotting out the real sun.

"Revolution?" The word buzzed electric in my ears.

"This is not the time to speak of it, but yes. There is so much for you to learn. But your powers offer a key to unlocking the shackles the Dram have placed over countless worlds."

"Why don't *you* fight them?"

"We are poorly suited to this task."

"Why?"

"It is an irony for many in the Resistance. The Xix have surpassed in knowledge and technology the known species of this galaxy. Yet we are unable to seek the destruction of others, even for the greater good. Life on our homeworld evolved toward synergy and symbiosis. An extreme end of the parasite-symbiote axis. We excel in the making of things, in the healing of hurts, in the explaining of what little of the universal mysteries that we can. Violence, the infliction of pain—these we recoil from. It is beyond mere morality. It is wired into our tissues from ancient beginnings."

"You had weapons when you came. I saw them. And I heard explosions."

Thel answered. "The blasts were attacks from the smugglers on our rescue teams. Many of our kind perished. The objects our forces held can stun attackers, but do not kill them. That is as violent as we can be. And few of us are able to undertake such training."

The other Xixian continued. "We know this limitation in ourselves, yet we cannot alter it. So, we seek other means or approaches to empower others to resist. Ambra, we suspect you may be what our resistance has been seeking for a long time. Something to turn the tide. The Dram are ruthless, powered by

terrible weapons and technology we of Xix shudder to contemplate. They were the first to probe the Orbs to manipulate them, because they wanted the power."

The Orbs. A thrill ran through me. As fatigue fought to drag me back to sleep, the image of an Orb burned in my memory.

"What power?"

"All the Orbs connect. They are found near planets with intelligent life. They gave the Dram access to many worlds, worlds unprepared to resist such an aggressive and merciless foe. Galactic wars followed, but soon they overpowered all. Now, the galaxy rots under this despotism. It must end."

The Xixians did the thing again with their eyestalks.

"We see you are tired. We have said more than we should have. We will let you rest. You have the means to examine the truth of our words. Use it. Come to see that we do not deceive you. We will return to speak more, and if you will consent, to begin a new journey."

"What journey?"

"One to understand your real potential. For now, we seek a physical place for that psychic trek."

"Where will we go?"

"Someplace safe. A secret location where you will learn the depth of what awaits you."

The two Xixians stood, legs moving at impossible angles in fluid motion. They strode to the door at the far wall.

"Rest now, Ambra Dawn, *Reader*. There is much yet that you must do."

The door slid open. The bobbing Xixian shapes passed through, leaving me alone in the room. Alone with too many thoughts for my exhausted mind to hope to consider.

Chapter 19

The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.

Plutarch

The next few weeks found my body healing and my sense of self staggering back. I was still thinner than I'd ever been. The sight of food convulsed my stomach as memories of the horror haunted me. But now that I wasn't starving, the mad hunger quieted in my thoughts. It felt like an exorcism to be freed of that sickening possession.

I forced myself to eat. Regardless of what had happened, whatever my life meant from my old perspectives, the words I had heard after waking on the Xixian ship had struck a deep chord. I didn't understand who or what I was anymore. But if I could make a difference? Help *turn the tide* in a universe I knew had, indeed, gone very wrong? Well, that is what I wanted to do.

Who knows? I might find something for my own salvation. And if I didn't, I had to discover what my role might be. So I

grimaced at the nutrients they placed in front of me, fought through my nausea, and gulped it down.

The Xix had freed the captives from the smugglers, bringing a few to this ship. They chose them for their Reader powers. And to keep me, their prized hope, from endless isolation from my kind. I became more and more grateful for this as time went on. The aliens were gentle and thoughtful, if always sharp and probing. But they were fundamentally disturbing. Even their smells offended some deep part of my primitive instincts. To have other humans around in this unhuman environment helped preserve my sanity.

We worked together with the Xix. First, they employed us in navigation. Their ship was so different from those of the smugglers or the Sortax. Xixian architectural lines were elegant, flowing, efficient. In comparison, other species assembled disjointed and haphazard structures, their craftsmanship plagued by decay and impermanence. This vessel appeared ageless, built yesterday, never showing a sign of wear.

They introduced us to their navpods. These were small, womb-like boxes as unlike the stalls on the smuggler craft as I could imagine. Navigators from Xix were onboard, but the natives gave way to the humans. They instructed us to steer through strange and roundabout courses. Thel, who was ever at my side during my time with them, explained. They sought unpredictable and less-traveled paths through the Orb String Tree (as they called the many branching and reconnecting routes of the hyperspace portals). Planets rarely visited. Places where our enemies wouldn't search.

This confused me, as I could find no reason the Dram should be after us. After all, it was only the Xix granting me any value in this alien universe. The bugs had examined me, branded me, and auctioned me off to the lowest of extraterrestrial life.

As time went on, I came to suspect it was because of the Resis-

tance. Some of the high-ranking members were on board the spacecraft. That's why they needed such secrecy.

Well, the last place I wanted to be was with those insectile butchers, so I did all I could to help guide us as Thel wished. It seemed successful. For many months, we never detected signs of any other vessel.

The transit times were on the order of several days per hyperspace jump. In contrast to the mad dashes of the smugglers, we took our time, and the Xix strategized each step. They also didn't want navigation to exhaust us, although the work was trivial compared to the smuggler nightmare. Instead, they asked us to focus our energies on the instruction and exams they prepared for us each day.

The Xixian trials were unlike the tests on Earth or in the Sortax training ship. They examined our abilities at a deeper level. They challenged our strength and finesse, probing spacetime in powerful and nuanced ways. The process instructed us as much as it evaluated.

Soon, I had gone far beyond the other humans. I got my own time. Private lessons, if you will, with Thel and some of the other alien Readers and scientists. While I was the subject of their experiments, I never felt like a lab rat in a cage. They functioned as my teachers, and I was happy to be their student. But I was also uncomfortable in this kind of relationship. I'd become accustomed to a master-slave dynamic.

I mentioned this to my extraterrestrial guru. It expressed surprise at my confusion.

"Ambra, what good will you be to yourself, or us, or others, if you are not nurtured to mature truly? We of Xix cannot see an object as a means to an end, but as a seed to nourish. To become."

"To become what?"

"What it is supposed to be."

Sounds cheesy, I admit, but these bizarre-looking things meant what they said.

For the first time in my life, someone explained what it was I was doing. What I was *seeing*. The way all Readers saw. Their translators amazed me. They unearthed simple phrases for ideas in math and physics I knew must be much more complicated in alien thought. Thel confirmed this to me.

"I will try to explain, Ambra. But human language, even your thought, is more primitive than Xixian. I don't say this to insult you. The words you hear are simplifications, and because so, distortions of the truth. But it is the best we have at our disposal."

I nodded, my attention focused in this practice room prepared for us. Every day, twice a day for hours, I convened here for my private lessons.

"I was trying yesterday to describe your Reader abilities. Calling it *vision* is a good analogy, because like sight, smell, hearing, and taste, it is a sense. It is a part of your body interacting with the world around you. It provides your mind with data about your surroundings."

The alien oriented several more eyes in my direction.

"But it is also a poor word. It ties you to a concept mangling the information you are receiving. Explaining flavor through sound distorts. Conveying scent by visual analogies jumbles the truth."

I bobbed my head up and down in agreement. What I encountered definitely didn't resemble any other way I knew of interpreting the universe.

"When you *Read*, Ambra, your neural organ, the growth you consider a tumor, is sensitive to particles, in a similar fashion to your eyes. Not light, but moieties transmitting facts about spacetime. Your physicists name them gravitons, as if those were real entities describing the physics of our cosmos. They are not and do not. But let us use the word for simplicity. The *gravitons* you

detect convey features of physical fields as photons do of the electromagnetic aspects of reality."

Science. I wished I had explored it much more in my searches of the past.

"What is important to understand is that space and time are always changing. In flux, like electricity and magnetism. Your ideas about them are very primitive. Your recent theories over the last two hundred years on Earth have scratched the surface of their complexity. But like you once could see the world with your eyes, what had happened, and what would happen, so you can see such things with your tumor. More directly."

"It doesn't feel like that."

"No, and it doesn't *feel* like that to *see*. Seeing gravitons isn't like some abstract particle trajectory diagram. When you were sighted, nearly every moment of your waking day you were detecting photons, bundles of electromagnetic energy, quanta, wave-particles dualities—light. You didn't see the physics. You *were* the physics. Your mind experienced the powerful green of an Earth plant, the churning froth of flowing water, the diamond pinpricks of stars in the night blackness."

The alien's ideas dropped and settled inside my consciousness. They were small bricks building a structure whose final form was not yet clear to me.

"These are encounters with the cosmos that shaped your emotions, your thoughts, your actions. *Photons*. That is something like the way a Reader can *see* gravitons, but as different from sight as vision is from smell. Such interactions extend into all areas of our awareness, our creativity, our dreams. As Readers, we have a sense others don't. They can't imagine or simulate our interplay with reality. We're helpless trying to explain the visual realm to a person blind from birth."

"Why can't I see the future like I can the past?"

"You can. It is how you navigate the Strings, seeing the lines of possible connection."

"But I *can't*! What happens *before* I see in detail. What follows after—it's a dream. A blur. I can't hold on to it. I don't know if those visions are real."

"And you know the histories you witness are real?"

"I discover things I find out are true."

"And so you will when you explore what is yet to be. You must tell us what you perceive in later times, Ambra. It may be very important."

"But I can choose to see into the past, search it, grab details, go where I want."

"We believe that, soon, you will learn to do this with the future as well."

When they weren't lecturing, they were training me to see farther, faster, and with more detail. Most work focused on the future. Already, I pretty much could ace anything they threw at me for Reading the past. I could see things their tests couldn't detect. But I was clumsy with the future, always going forward and falling back. My failures frustrated me, building anxiety. As always, Thel helped me understand.

"You stumble not because you cannot, but because you *will* not."

"I will not what?"

"Ambra, you are afraid."

I let that sit with me. The truth of it sank deep. I knew the alien was right. When I began to peer over the edge of the now to glimpse that giant continent of what was to come, shimmering like a city at night, terror rose inside and paralyzed me.

I could see the shadows of things I knew, and many I did not. Out there, in the middle of it, were semblances of *me*. Whenever I sensed these figures, the landscape snapped back, my vision darkened, and I would lose concentration.

"You are afraid to see yourself in what approaches."

"Yes."

"That is a misguided fear. You cannot."

"But I can! I can see outlines, forms..."

"Have you ever tried to focus on those shapes?"

"No, I withdraw when I do, before I realized what I'm doing!"

"No matter how hard you try, even if you overcome your anxiety, you will never see the details of your future."

"So, it can only be known in general terms?"

"No, that is not what I said. We are convinced you have the capacity to see specifics of the forthcoming, of many lives, just not your own."

"Why not my own?"

"Few Readers have seen much about what is to come. Those who have always failed to see themselves. We of Xix believe we understand why. You have begun to study physics in earnest. Do you know the uncertainty principle?"

"Something about not being able to know where something is and how fast it's going?"

"A distilled exemplar. The general concept involves the effect of the experimenter on the measured. You cannot detect something with high accuracy without disturbing the entity examined. For example, using electromagnetic waves to visualize slides in a microscope or atoms with X-rays. The more precision you pursue, the more detail you chase, the more you disturb the environment by probing it."

I was giving myself a headache, scrunching my face, struggling to understand. "So we mess things up by sticking our noses in. Then we can't know exactly what we messed up."

"Not a terrible way to put it. Seek to establish the location of a molecule, and you add energy to it and speed it up. Attempt to measure its velocity, and you lose track of precisely where it is. You can't have all the information in the system. It is blurred. There-

fore, you can only know facts at a certain level of uncertainty. A version of this applies when Readers try to determine their own place in spacetime."

My brain was overheating. "Can *you* see my future, Thel?"

"I have tried, as have others on the ship. We cannot. You cast strong distortions in the fabric of reality. It is impossible to Read too close to you in what follows."

"What does that mean?"

"It means, Ambra, you have powers even we do not yet comprehend."

This triggered something in my mind. The Xix didn't know everything. More than most, or so they led me to believe (and so I was to see verified in my experience and my past searches). But like other creatures, they did not understand the Orbs. They used them, but like the rest, only the overflow of the energy from those spheres. I had felt the depth and power in them. Something more than anything I had experienced. More and more they captured my thought.

"Thel, what are the Orbs?"

The creature was silent for a moment, its eyestalks dancing around. After a few minutes, I thought it would not answer me, or perhaps I had offended. When it spoke, it was serious, almost with tones of awe.

"You have made the right connection in this conversation. The Orbs. They are wonders all species study and yet which remain mysterious even to us. Have you wondered why they are found only beside worlds with life, and only intelligent life?"

I had to admit I had not.

"It is much more than curious, Ambra. The Orbs are not natural objects like stars, nebulae, or planets. They are artificial, built billions of years ago for a purpose which lies locked within them."

"Built? By who?"

"This is a great mystery. We are ignorant. Whatever intelligence made them is beyond anything in our galaxy. Far more developed than any technology known in the Hegemony. Even more than we Xix." I could almost detect a smile again in the tones of the voice.

"We hypothesize that they were meant as portals. Not for the crude use we make of them, but for something more profound. And we also do not consider their presence near sentience coincidence. It is causal."

My chest tightened. "Causal?"

"The Dram outlaw this as a dangerous line of thought. It threatens their rule, their power in the galaxy. But we believe something far older is behind this. Predating the Orbs. This intelligence shaped the evolution of life. Intelligent life, in particular on all the worlds neighboring an Orb. Most name them the Ancient Ones. We refer to them as the Gardeners, with affection."

"Gardeners? Like we are their plantings?"

"Yes, Ambra. I'm glad you seem to understand. We are the young saplings they planted as seeds eons ago in the little incubators we call solar systems."

My head was swimming. "Thel, what does all this mean?"

"It means the galaxy and the Dram are small things in a much greater universe, and this should give us hope."

The alien paused, continuing in the smiling tone I had come to recognize. "But you tire. Enough for today! We'll consider this and other topics again tomorrow."

Chapter 20

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

Albert Einstein

Nothing good ever lasts, someone once said.

I would add that you can't even count on the merely okay to stick around in this universe. Sorry to be such a cynic. I've lived through too much.

My time on the Xixian ship wasn't pleasant. It was not what my heart desired, which was to return home. But it was a time to heal, a time during which my great ignorance began to be addressed, when my teachers planted seeds for the future. It also turned out to be a short time. Evil again stamped its ugly boot on my world and shattered decency.

The attack came as we were preparing for our next hyperjump. I sat in one of the navpods, helmet in place, waiting to guide the ship. We approached an Orb orbiting a star system with thirty-three planets, if you can picture that. The system had centuries

ago fallen victim to the Dram, the main planet with life obliterated for defying their overlords.

It was mostly a computer-managed run past a collection of impact-smashed, dead worlds. Automated mining equipment surrounded many, extracting materials. We were ten minutes from close approach to the portal. I closed my eyes for the moment, resting my mind.

I'd progressed in my studies the last week. More and more, I allowed myself to face the visions of the future. Nibbling at their edges. Predicting controlled incidents in the context of their measuring devices. I was stretching further.

Seeing forward has a lot in common with viewing the past, but previous events are not relived. When you encounter the impending reality of your surroundings and watch it play out in front of you, it can be unsettling. If you glance on the edge of the now, you can recapture the ability to see the world around you, despite blindness. Almost synced with the present, it was useful for me.

The more distant my search from the moment, the more out of phase my vision was with my environment. The future would become the now, like beats of sound between two closely tuned strings. The rhythm of events thumped in my awareness, seen first in my mind, experienced next in my current moments. It is hard to explain, but it was fun to play with as I got the hang of it.

Just this day, I crept farther forward. I probed occurrences several minutes before they happened. As I did so, my thoughts were trapped in paradoxes. I questioned Thel. Could my knowing the future allow me to change it? How could *that* make sense?

"Paradox presents in a simplistic comprehension of time, a view where effects are proportional to their causes. Spacetime is decidedly nonlinear, recursive in manners your scientists have yet to appreciate. Your visions themselves propagate waves through a multidimensional continuum. These alter what you see, like your

swimming in the sea changes the shape of the water in which you swim."

The memory of our discussion prompted my mind forward again. It was a struggle, using a muscle unaccustomed to exercise. But I was a bit drunk on the wonder of the experience. The thirst for the high pushed me beyond the fatigue. I extended my awareness outside the ship and leapt into the future. Farther than I had yet managed.

My screams brought several Xix running to me.

"Thel. Where is *Thel*?" I cried out, my breathing heavy. I couldn't see, couldn't focus on Reading the recent past. Images of coming events muddied my efforts and vertigo spun my head.

"Thel is not in the helm. We may send a message if you wish. What is wrong?"

The shock of my vision squeezed my heart. I gasped. "Oh God... *Danger*. Something...approaching. The ship...attack! *Thel*..."

"The ship is in danger of attack?" repeated one.

Alarms erupted about us. The bright lights dimmed as emergency defenses activated.

A Xixian pilot called from one of its stations, "Dram warship. Armed and closing."

The aliens switched to their own language for more rapid communication.

I was still ignorant about much of their technology. I assumed they had some sort of defense shield or the like. *Or is that science fiction?* As so often in my journey from Earth, I was confused and helpless. All I could do was wait.

One of the Xix approached me. "We are trying to make a run for the Orb. Be prepared to make the jump. The battle cruiser is firing on us, and we may not make it."

"Firing? I don't feel anything."

"You will not unless our defenses fail. We are absorbing

tremendous energy from a determined attack of a fully armed Dram military vessel. There is little hope. Please be ready."

I nodded and slipped on the helmet. The ship dashed, zigzagging through the obstacle course of planets and asteroids. Its eventual goal, the Orb. The String we needed was easy to spot. I shouldn't have any trouble guiding us, despite our speed. A few minutes at this rate. I was sure we'd make it.

We lurched. Artificial gravity failed. Circuits exploded as power surges ran through the system. Inertia maintained our trajectory, the Orb filling our view as we approached. Only moments to the glowing tendril.

A Xixian voice spoke through my navpod. "Reader, it is no use. They have damaged our hyperspace propulsion. We have normal mobility, but we are unable to make the jump."

My heart stuck in my throat. *The Dram!* What would they do?

"Will they destroy us here?"

"No. They targeted the Time Turbines to prevent escape. They could have destroyed us. Our craft is trapped in the system. We cannot evade them. They want us alive. They will board."

In my mind, images of the coming reality I had glimpsed poured through my awareness. "Thel..."

No! I shut my thoughts to the terrible visions. I couldn't allow those monsters to enter the ship. I wouldn't let it happen. Thel hinted that I could alter the future with my knowledge. *I would!*

The multifaceted and layered glory of the Orb neared. I gazed at it, drawn by my fascination and raw desperation. The Xix said they were portals. We used them in a crude and clumsy way.

Portals, but how?

I probed the layers. I focused all my thought on the spacetime gate. The interlocking pieces, tunnels through reality that mixed and dove and intertwined in a multidimensional puzzle.

"A labyrinth..."

"Can you repeat?" asked an alien in my headset.

"Steer us into the Orb."

"What?! Reader, that is impossible! It is death."

"*Please*...trust me. I can see...*doors* inside. There are paths through the maze..."

"No one has approached an Orb directly and survived. You have great vision, but this..."

"Listen! If we don't, many will die! It's the Dram!"

After a moment, Thel's voice spoke over the others. "Ambra, they will have us in minutes. Are you certain about this?"

What could I say? Of course, I wasn't sure! I didn't have any idea what I was doing. I only knew I had to do something. I *had* seen *something*—structure in the Orbs, and paths. But I couldn't see the end point. Could I imprison us in a spacetime maze forever?

"Thel...I see through the Orb. I can guide us through. Give me control of the ship. Let me try."

"Okay, Ambra. Better we die in the Orb than at the hands of the Dram. I had hoped for more before death. To see Xix a last time."

The gates of light opened to my mind. Like understanding a geometry problem, a shimmer spread from my time-sense image of Thel to me, and from me to the Orb. The flash triggered a series of tumble locks in motion, one after the other, falling into place. *I saw!* Clear as a trail in the forest. I knew a way through the maze.

The ship's controls passed to me. With a burst, I plunged us into the Orb. The sphere brightened like a nova. What followed was the most insane roller-coaster ride I could have imagined. We hurtled through one spacetime wormhole after another. The ship darted across countless dimensions in directions impossible, perpendicular to everything. Spaces incongruent with the human mind.

Faster we flew, as if the Orb lacked a bottom within its finite

spherical enclosure. The vessel obeyed the path I directed, the course illuminated for me through means I did not understand. I could focus on nothing else. I could sense nothing in my environment. Only diving deeper into the bowels of light and distance, bending around a circle, yet finding ourselves somewhere new.

It may have lasted a second or a millennium, I couldn't tell, but I experienced a *before* and an *after*. The radiant tunnel opened into a sea of darkness. Countless bright points pricked the black background. The ship erupted from an Orb. Behind us, the sphere incandesced as I have never seen. We drifted through normal space again. An orange star shone before us, and nearby, the crescent of a desert world.

I laid back in my navpod. Sweat poured down my face. My lungs labored. Exhaustion weighed me down, but I knew I had done something never believed possible. And I had saved us from the Dram.

"Ambra, are you all right?" The tones transmitted into the navpod were Thel's. Not elated, but sober, almost still.

"Yeah. Hey, told you I could do it!"

"Yes, you did."

"Where are we?"

"You don't know?"

"No...crazy, I led us here, so I guess I should. But I don't."

"It's Xix. My homeworld. You listened to my last wish. Somehow, you heard it, discerned its location. You've brought me home."

Chapter 21

What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is the breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset.

Chief Isapo-Muxika ("Crowfoot")

Thel's words made me smile, and I laughed as I laid back in my navpod. "Hey! How about that? *Home*. That is a good word. Safe at last."

"No, Ambra, not safe."

I stiffened in the pod. "What do you mean?"

Thel sounded tired, almost sad. "We have determined how the Dram found us. They've been tracking you since you left Earth, on the device they embedded in you. Another blind spot for us Xix—their deviousness. The Sortax must have warned them you possessed potential value. Never ones to lose an opportunity, yet unwilling to waste energy on a fruitless effort, they did not place a standard branding chip in you. They placed a hyperspace tracker. This is able to send weak signals along the Strings. It allowed them

to remain aware of your position. We deciphered the signal as it resonated with their warships."

What nonsense was this? "But they sold me to those monsters. I could have died there! If they were curious about my value, they wouldn't have risked wasting me so stupidly."

"You don't understand our oppressors, Ambra. Yes, they would have risked it. In their cruel philosophy, their extreme religious beliefs, strength rises. It is manifested in survival. If you had perished, it would have proved to them your lack of worth, however myopic that viewpoint may be. But we of Xix have our blind spots. We thought ourselves ingenious in zigzagging our way through the String Tree. But the chip reported your every jump. It would become apparent that your travel was anomalous. It marked us as suspicious through our idiotically clever methods of remaining hidden. We telegraphed your significance. They converged on us."

"But we lost them! We are safe now."

"After the passage through the Orb, I had hoped so. But the tracking device was able to broadcast, even through that series of dimensional portals. We intercepted communications as soon as we entered Xixian space. Dram warships will arrive here by hyperspace at any moment."

"Can't Xix protect us?" I asked with a growing desperation.

"Not overtly, Ambra. We must act the part of an independent faction, our communications with Xix performatively hostile. We dare not risk them destroying our homeworld. And believe me, they can. They are *terrible*."

My panic rose. I was exhausted from the journey. I couldn't think. I struggled to scan the near past or future to see. "What do we do?"

"There is nothing to be done. Our ship is without power. The damage from the attack, and even more so the trip through the Orb, has left us floating in space, life support limping. Before

Xixian ships can come to our aid, our enemies will be here, right off the String. We cannot fight or run. We will have to be more clever. We will allow ourselves to be captured."

"Why?"

"Don't think Xix is ignorant. They are aware of everything and will study the recordings of the Orb traversal. This will convince them of your powers, Ambra, which are beyond even what I might have expected. But they will help indirectly, later when the time is ripe."

"Time? We won't have time. The Dram will kill us!"

"Kill us? Perhaps many of us. But not you. They have seen what you have done. They will put together the information from the chip and the activation of an Orb. They know an Earth Reader, one marked for observation, was aboard a ship that made that unprecedented journey. They will do everything possible to learn this secret, to harness this power. No, they will not kill you, not yet. Not until they believe they have exhausted all avenues to master this ability. They will preserve you, Ambra, although they will not be kind. But it is essential that you survive! A little while, no matter what they do to you. I promise, we will come. Somehow, we will come. You are our hope, and the doom of us all if the Dram control you."

"Control me? How?"

"Don't think of such things. Word is out. The Resistance will come. You must hang on."

A sharp rapping on my navpod window shook me out of thought. An alien navigator was standing outside, motioning for me to exit. I stepped out, trembling. The ship was dark except for emergency lighting. It looked wounded. The crew was gone.

The pilot spoke. "Thel is coming. The rest of us are assembling near the entrances. A Dram warship has locked onto us, and we are being pulled into a docking position. They will be here momentarily."

The elevator doors opened, and Thel moved in. They communicated together in the Xixian language, and the pilot walked off to the lift and disappeared within it.

Thel crouched beside me. "They are approaching, Ambra. The slaughter is merciless. Soldiers are killing all Xix and scanning humans for your chip, executing those who do not match. We don't have much time, and I need to tell you something before they arrive."

My mind was treading water. Why couldn't we run? Hide? *Something?* Sitting, waiting for them to take us, it made no sense!

Beyond my panic, a dread was forcing itself into my awareness. An ominous shadow, terrible and familiar. As if the room were adopting a shape in my thoughts, a place I had seen earlier but had not visited. *Déjà vu*. Part of me knew it was important, but I couldn't focus in this madness.

"Listen to me, Ambra." Thel gripped my shoulders. "A last physics lesson to take with you."

Science now? *Had it gone insane?*

"Sentience is a field. A *physical force* like electromagnetism or gravity. This won't make sense to you, but it is a truth of the cosmos. Unification theories marry all the energies of nature. Not as your scientists would have hoped, but something far grander, more subtle. But a consequence of these two things is that sentient thought is coupled to the spacetime matrix. The more consciousness, the more complex it becomes, the more coupling. Advanced civilizations with many billions of hyper-intelligent beings distort the local universe to a measurable degree. This effect can subtly perturb even the orbits of their planets."

I was shaking my head, not understanding. This was all gibberish.

"Ambra, thought *itself* sends ripples through space and time. We of Xix had always wondered if this could lead to communication through the cosmic continuum."

I heard explosions and screams, the sounds of conflict and stamping of feet. I would have retreated to a corner and hid, but Thel's strong grip kept me in place.

"Communication?" I stammered out, my heart drumming in my chest.

"Telepathy, you would call it. But nothing mystical or magical. You perceive distortions in the fabric of reality, Ambra. Cognition contributes to this framework. Hence, with your great sensitivity, you can sense those thought ripples. You can *Read* minds."

I shook my head again. "Thel, no, I can't."

The sounds were closer, deafening. The lift signaled it was heading downward. *What had called it?*

"You can, and you *did*. How did you bring us to my homeworld?"

"I don't know! I just saw the way."

"You perceived a path through the Orb, but to where? You couldn't have known *yourself* where Xix lay. What was the last thing I said to you before we made the traversal?"

My mind raced. The elevator had stopped below and begun its ascent. The ship shook from new explosions. Time had run out and something was coming. "I don't know! You said you wanted to go home again!"

"Yes! Don't you see? My consciousness focused on my planet. You detected those ripples of my awareness, needing a path through which to steer our vessel. You *Read* my thoughts, Ambra, just as you *Read* the past and the future. Both are embedded in the spacetime matrix."

"It can't be true."

The alien's eyestalks bent as one to me, hovering over my face.

"Listen to me. It is. Don't turn away from this! You must develop it, harness your powers. You will need all of them to withstand what comes next. Believe in yourself. *Survive*. You are what we have been waiting for."

Thel shuddered and flung its arms in several directions, one of them striking me. I slammed to the floor, a sharp pain in my back. With a flash of light and a crash, the alien dropped beside me, its monstrous form charred and smoking, eyestalks filmed over and gray.

As I gawked upward, Dram infantry aimed weapons at me. One stepped forward, raising a strange device. I crouched lower, tears streaming out of my sightless eyes. I sobbed at what was left of the Xix—extraterrestrial, *other*, one of *Them*, yet my teacher, my healer, a caring force against the cruelty I'd known. Thel was not indifferent or hostile. Thel was another thinking being that had spent its last moments helping me.

To save a galaxy.

I wept at this death, and also for my failure to stop it. The vision lurking at the edges of my awareness locked in sync with the present. Now I remembered. I *had* seen this before. In my terrible reading of the future preceding the Orb traversal—a fate where Thel died beside me. The premonition had driven me to warn the Xix, and to find a way to pass through the portals. I had witnessed this slaughter and had opened the portal to prevent this destiny as much or more than to escape the warships.

But it had *not* saved Thel. My actions to undo that reality fit into the chain of events producing it. *Why*? I had an explanation. *Because I had not studied closely enough.* Because I had not dissected the details of my prophecy. It didn't console me that there hadn't been time, that the Dram attack was imminent and forced me to act. The future had no mercy. Its complexities demanded serious contemplation. I cursed my naivete.

I examined the immediate present. The clicking soldiers put down the chip-scanner and spoke in their hideous language. A towering pair raced forward and jerked me to my feet. They dragged me back, casting me to my knees under some higher-ranked insect.

"They are our properties! Resist not otherwise they are eliminated," shrieked the Dramian translator.

I went limp, and the bugs hustled me through the Xixian ship and into their warcraft. Along the way, I mourned the bodies of Xix and humans, side by side, blasted apart and left to rot by the Dram army. A terrible anger flamed inside my mind, a hatred I had never known, even after all the evil inflicted on me.

As their troops tossed me through the hallways, I vowed revenge. I would punish these bugs. I would hurt them. For what they had done to me. To my world. To all the worlds beneath their savage rule.

The fury blinded my sixth sense. A white-hot plasma simmered before me, occluding anything else.

My thoughts were fire.

Chapter 22

He who has a why *to live can endure almost any* how.

Friedrich Nietzsche

It wasn't long before the bugs questioned me.

They had tossed me into a high-tech cage. Like the rest of the warship, it was an efficient and cruel construction. Dram design had such a harsh sense of purpose. It bordered on architectural sadism. Like the underwater chambers on the Sortax homeworld, the same strange metals with embedded luminescence characterized the materials. There were three walls. The fourth was an invisible force field. Light and air entered, but it resisted any attempts to press against it. The harder one pushed, the more solid the unseen wall became. I managed to inch a few fingertips through the resistance, but no more.

Armed soldiers stalked outside my cell, but their eyestalks never tipped in my direction. Dumb humans don't score high in the "escape risk" column, I suppose. And that pretty much was the reality for me. I abandoned probing the walls and sat in a

corner, knees pulled to my chest and my arms wrapped around them. But I didn't cry. Something adamantine percolated inside me with anger and determination.

After some time, another of the aliens approached my cell. The creature clicked at guards, who deactivated the shield wall. It entered with a soldier alongside. The thing was shorter than the patrols, dressed in a less militaristic outfit, and it carried no weapons. *Hive officer?* Small bubbles floated, surrounding the central bulges of its eyestalks. *Alien glasses?* The insect bent its body in half. The lower abdomen and legs ran parallel with the floor. The upper portion and "head" were angled at sixty-degrees to the rest. The eyes with their little lens-spheres aimed toward me.

"They are it, which opened the Orb?" it began.

God, how I hated those translators.

I focused. Thel had admonished me to survive, but I couldn't bring myself to reply to these butchers. The bug head tilted left, right, seeking a better view of me and my silence.

"They are it, which opened the Orb?" it repeated.

Still, I said nothing.

It continued, over and over, in one language after another. After ten or fifteen repetitions, the irritation provoked me. I figured speaking to this thing was infinitely preferable to getting a tour of badly translated Dram in all of Earth's tongues.

"English," I spat. "I speak English."

The insect stared at me.

"They are it, which opened the Orb?" it rang out again.

"Yes, for God's sake. Now can we move on beyond this?"

It pulled out a small device, horribly reminiscent of the Sortax gadget that had nearly killed me on Earth. I didn't waste time, but screamed, startling the bug and causing several of its many back feet to retreat. The guard raised its weapon.

"Careful! You have to use the *lowest* mode on that thing, or you'll kill me, and then I won't be any good to you! I'm a powerful

Reader, and I am far more sensitive to the spacetime matrix than others."

"Applicable is this?" it asked.

"Yes! Turn the detector all the way down. You'll see."

The Dram officer adjusted the device and aimed it at me. I tensed, but it was not painful. The equivalent of several, low-level lasers flitting over your eyes. Compared to the Orbs, such simple, boring patterns to me now.

"They are much highly cannot be measured." The bug turned off the machine. "Why negative the Sortax explain rather to us?"

"Because they're stupid squid-heads," I added helpfully.

"They are stupid. To be punished." It tapped onto a small gadget and replaced it on a belt around its upper abdomen. The thing continued to stare at me.

Thel's last lesson rushed back, those mad ideas about me Reading minds. The Xix had said it was real. That I couldn't turn away from it. That I would need all my skills to survive. I decided to trust those final words, to believe in them with all I had. If they were true, I would find out now and probe my captors.

I closed my eyes as the creature observed me. Being blind, it didn't do much, but it was a long habit from sighted years when trying to focus. I concentrated and used the meditative techniques Thel had taught me. Past and future rocked back and forth. I ignored them, seeking something different, something tied to the alien crowding my cage.

Epiphany. Like seeing an optical illusion shift from one image to another. A subtle and effervescent shimmering winked from items around me. The glow popped in and out like lightning in a storm. Inanimate objects were dark. But not the extraterrestrial monsters. They radiated intricate weavings of filigree.

One was simpler, more angular and hard. *The soldier*. The other was harsh, as all Dram, but nuanced and layered. A deeper

complexity pulsed in this one. Its thoughts disturbed the space-time matrix in multiple dimensions at once.

And so much fear. I could recognize the emotion also in this unfamiliar creature. It wasn't anxiety. It was a deep alarm, absent from the mind of the guard. This intrigued me. It testified to a sense of my own power in this place. This officer sought something terrible and important from me.

My eyes opened. "Why are you afraid of me?" I probed, offering a wild opening gambit.

The insect recoiled again, taking several steps back. "They are an intelligent," it responded. It decided to resort to a lie. "The Dram fear nothing! But we are try to we include, what you to be have made."

"You mean activating the Orb?"

"Yes! How base creatures, a nothing member of Hegemony, is in position so that does make such a thing? Which secrecy did you learn of Holy Orbs?"

Flattery it wasn't. And *Holy Orbs?* This was getting weird.

"Are you a priest?"

Anger flashed from the creature.

"No! Never! I do not grasp the idiots of those superstitions! I besides the fact that potential in the Orbs, it seems I and like me, understand those respect in order to control, seeking those."

Control? Power? *A technologist! A scientist, perhaps.* This made sense. My Readings of its consciousness fell into place. The picture clarified, its personality and motivations exposed. *Motivations to be exploited.*

"I can control them. You want me to give you my secret?"

The insect's feet tap-danced, bringing its hideous face close to mine.

"When Dram want, they take," it hissed.

Careful, Ambra. "If you make a mistake, and you harm me, you may damage my mind, and you will never learn the mystery.

Do you dare take that risk now, alone? What will your punishment be if you fail?"

The wash of anxiety from the insect was like a prismatic spray. Again, it retreated several steps. "They are a human intelligent, yes. Special. But with us is skillful large number very with persuasion. The emperor thinks, is grasped that we consume this you-power. It orders. Then this word of you has not importance. Until time, enjoy the existence."

The officer clicked toward the guard, who escorted the creature through the door. It reengaged the force field, leaving me alone, and for the moment, free from their probes.

But for how long? I could feel the time-tugs of hyperspace jumps—we had made at least four since they captured me. These bugs couldn't go straight to the destination they wished as I had done. Like all space-faring aliens, they had to follow the indirect routes of the String Tree. But soon they would arrive at their homeworld. The nexus of their hegemony. With their emperor and all their numbers "very with persuasion."

I would be in their hands. I doubted they could learn how I controlled the Orbs. *I* didn't know. But they might kill me trying to find out. *Or worse.* I had to get out of this. For so many, not just myself.

Every expansion of my abilities centered on life crises, and it was no different this time. I sat down in the cell. I crossed my legs, closed my eyes, and allowed my fear of the future to wash over me. I decided to believe in my potential, to risk anything, including my sanity, to cross over the planes of possibility and look the tsunami of coming events square in the face. More than my single life relied on me becoming what the Xix thought I could be. If they were right, the freedom of so many in the galaxy might depend on it.

Yes, it was megalomaniacal. But you can't let humility get in the way of saving the universe.

Nothing in my life or training prepared me for what was

about to happen. I sank into a deep trance. My awareness plunged inward. Deeper, until I could count every heartbeat. I analyzed each slow breath as my lungs drew in air and forced it out. My Dram prison receded to some point at an infinite distance.

The secret in meditation is finding without seeking. At this terrible separation, the future edged microscopically close to me. One by one, by force of will, I toppled the obstacles my psychology erected. They flooded me with panic, a disembodied voice screaming to go no further. My soul trembled at what lay on the other side. But an anger filled me with purpose. An inferno towered over my fears, and I knocked them down.

The fiery rage supercooled my sixth sense, priming it. A bottle in the freezer, pulled out hours later, unfrozen, shaken, and crystallized in an instant. My vision awakened. My bulging organ opened its odd eyes from a long slumber, and the forthcoming burst over me like a shattered dam. The power of the rushing futures, their terrible weight, was irresistible. A thousand revelations ravaged my mind without respite. On and on, over days dragging me to depths of consciousness never explored.

I fought a fierce battle to stay focused, to hold these visions at bay, to integrate the now and the coming times. Present, past, and the enormous future boiled and mixed within me. They blurred one into the other in a confused kaleidoscope. Approaching incidents gave birth to historical ones. Cause and effect became meaningless.

I stepped out of time. Before me frothed colossal rivers of events, tossing and twisting, undulating, crashing, and morphing. No reference point. No arrow of time. Only the ever-churning currents in an infinite ocean. I lost myself at sea, set adrift, unable to find a safe shore.

In this trance, I responded to nothing. Dram medics and scientists labored to revive me. Three weeks of travel through the String Tree and two more in a hospital on their homeworld. I lay

unmoving and unresponsive. My captors and representatives from several species observed with great anxiety.

But I found my way home. The meaning of how it happened, I leave to you.

The mists cleared over the endless squall. Ricky beamed in the distance and called my name across the waves. I followed his voice, swimming against the raging currents to a bright chamber at the heart of the ocean. A sea of voices and souls swirled about him. It drew me in, locking outside the shudders and sounds and groans of the tempest of time.

Radiance rose, bathing in the scent of his joy. The echoing luminosity enveloped me, caressing my awareness. Tasting it, I laughed at the ridiculous simplicity.

I understood what he tried to tell me that day.

Chapter 23

We do not rest satisfied with the present. We anticipate the future as too slow in coming, as if in order to hasten its course; or we recall the past, to stop its too rapid flight. So imprudent are we that we wander in the times which are not ours, and do not think of the only one which belongs to us; and so idle are we that we dream of those times which are no more, and thoughtlessly overlook that which alone exists.

Blaise Pascal

I drifted in a still and silent realm.

Uncountable patterns of stars lit the darkness. In back of me, the golden light of the sun pushed forward, and like a ghostly boat, I sailed on the solar wind. Accelerating, I gained speed past Mercury. Beyond the sulfurous clouds of greenhouse Venus. The moon appeared once more. Behind it, a quarter surrounding a dime, the blue, white, and green-brown of Earth.

It captured my heart.

Earth! In glory, she hung in the cold blackness. After the violet

seas of the Sortax, the alien structures of the Dram, the orange deserts of Xix, and the countless sterile and horrible things I had seen, before me was the one place in all the expanse where we belonged. All human beings.

Home.

I wept and smiled. I rushed like a gleeful child into the embrace of her mother, dashing past the lifeless moon, limbs outstretched and encompassing the blue marble as it approached me.

I was going home.

My smile foundered, broke, and faded like clouds against a mountainside. A terrible mask of horror replaced it. I watched in madness as the planet dissolved in my arms. Pole to pole, sea and land, the sphere shattered like a stained-glass window, the separate fragments blurring and melting in my hands. I worked my palms, trying to reshape the thing as if it were some dissolving snowball on a warm spring day. But nothing could slow the merciless process.

The Earth *melted.* Blue-white-brown ink dripped through my fingers. I wailed as the paints poured into the blackness, evaporating in a faint mist into nothingness.

My scream echoed through the emptiness. A wolf's howl reverberating in a stone cathedral. A wild dirge for a soul forever abandoned in the icy emptiness. Unable to perish. Powerless to escape.

Doomed to wander the hell-void, desolate and dispossessed.

Chapter 24

No visiting angel, or explorer from another planet could have guessed that this bland orb teemed with vermin, with world-mastering, self-torturing, incipiently angelic beasts.

Olaf Stapledon

I awoke to the freakish form of a Xixian medic.

Its grotesque contours, bobbling eyes, and many-fingered extremities danced above me. For a moment, I was back on the ship with Thel. False relief ran like opioids through my veins. The nightmarish attack, Thel's death, the melting Earth, the awful series of dreams.

It was only a confused vision!

The movements of Dram attendants standing around the physician slapped me into the present. Doom and dread descended, cruel reality hammering my guts.

No.

I relived it all, gritting my teeth to ground myself. Smoldering

anger summoned the grim determination born in the trauma of those events.

"You are awake," said the Xixian medic.

The insects crowded behind, observing. Their many hands and fingers clacked against each other, but they did not interfere.

"Why does a Xix work with *them?*" I hissed.

"We serve everywhere within the Hegemony," it chirped. "Especially in the medical sciences, where our talents and technology cannot be perverted to actions running counter to our being. We often prove quite *useful*," it said.

Did its words have a hidden meaning? Thel had said its people would know about me, would help me. Was this medic communicating this?

A Dram military officer stormed into the room, preventing any further communication. Its composite armor clattered in sync to its many feet. The foul head pivoted to the Xixian doctor. After several bursts of clacking between them, the Xix bowed and left the room.

The bug turned on me. "Depending upon us the best efforts employed, had in order to maintain human, its life. They must better prove the emperor their worth."

"And if I don't?" I wasn't feeling cooperative.

"Then they will end." It signaled to other infantry, and they wheeled my bed out of the room.

"Wait!" I interrupted, pushing myself up and swinging my legs over the side. "I can walk."

The officer clacked, they released the gurney, and I walked of my own accord. The trance had weakened me, my muscles unused in the deep coma. But I was determined to give them as little power over me as possible. Stiff and shaky, I lumbered forward.

They marched me down several hallways and to an adjoining building packed with prison cells. A hideous guard stopped in

front of a cell like the one on the Dram warship. It deactivated the field, and the soldiers shoved me inside, reactivating the screen.

The officer stared across the barrier at me. "This health, it is good therefore to be maintained. That we being expected from directly, makes that trial is begun attainable. The tomorrow supporter, the advocate, is to be allotted. That it cooperates to investigation, is best your, with of everything where you are required is made clear."

Yes, better I clarify it all to them, I'm sure. With that hardly veiled or coherent threat, it turned and hustled out of the corridor. The devils left me to my thoughts and the silence of the prison ward.

Exhaustion crushed me. I wanted nothing more than to curl up on the floor and sleep. I knew I had to rest. Eat. Recover. But so much to do. So little time.

The visions swam in and out of my awareness, longing to break free. I shook my head. *Not again*. I was in control, and I needed to pull my head out of ten thousand futures and into the now.

It had mentioned a trial. That sounded *wonderful*. It promised me an advocate. Of what use would a defender be in the murderous Dram justice system? How could I prepare?

I was not left much time to plan. Within a few hours, a group I identified as members of the technologists—as I liked to think of them—came tramping into my cell. The guards bristled at their entrance and orders, preferring the military wing in their power structure.

The techies positioned themselves in a semicircle around me. Already, I had probed enough of the immediate future to anticipate their first actions. I spoke to prevent any unpleasant scans of my tumor.

"Before you pull out your scanners and fry my brain, please

turn them down to the lowest setting. I am very sensitive and will register at your weakest levels."

A chaotic laser-light show frolicked through my awareness. The swarm twitched and exchanged eyestalk glances.

One in the middle of the semicircle revealed itself to be the leader. "You expect our energies well."

I decided to unload on them early. "I *Read* your actions. I saw it in my immediate future."

"You are so much powerful Reader?" it asked.

"I can do this and many more things."

"You have then the open of the Orbs," it said. The lousy translator somehow got across the awe behind the question.

"Yes."

"This possible with from Ancient Ones?"

"It comes from me."

This elicited a lot of excited clicking.

"It should they are sharing these informations with us, that we can present to the emperor!"

"I will not."

"It must! They will suffer in the questionings if there is not! And they will be in the danger of partisans that will seek execution before they attend to what is known or can made be. For them, you gestate the heresy, that contaminating the Holy Orbs. They will not allow in it in order to they will live. Only death given with them. It should there is saving and it say to us how this thing is performed!"

Decoding their longer translations was always a headache. "The *partisans*? Oh, I see. The priests." I didn't care if the term was appropriate. Getting tangled in the petty politics of this hateful society was the least of my worries. I had experienced too much, and these idiots were blind where I could see. Their presence sickened me.

"Let me tell you something, *insect*. In thirty seconds, an angry

group of your priestly friends is going to barge in. You will have a screaming fight with them. Their soldiers will shout at the guards here. And you will be promptly thrown out on your exoskeletoned asses. You won't ever be alone with me again. So, there won't be a chance for me to tell you anything."

I leaned forward, so livid I spit in its eyestalks. "But even if there were, I wouldn't tell you a thing, you murderous piece of Dram vermin. You've enslaved my species. My parents were gunned down in cold blood because of you. I watched your sick soldiers slaughter the innocent and brave. I will *die* before giving you the key to more power than you already have. And you might as well calm down. Here are your *holy* friends."

The anger radiating from the group was so intense, I flinched. But I had vision they didn't.

As I spoke my last sentence, the clerical delegation stormed into the cell area, and the shouting (or clicking) match began. Soon, the guards ejected the techies to great waves of gloating from the priests. They exchanged furious clicks down the hallway until they were out of earshot. And for the night, I was offered some peace.

But serenity wouldn't stay. I continued to shift through the visions of the future that had consumed me. If I did not hold them back, they could flood through my mind, strangling consciousness. To remain within the now, I had to exert enormous control. I filtered the flow, allowing small streams of information to leak through. I dammed the rest, blocking them in a section of my thoughts. The slow trickle I sifted, mapping out the coming of events, and more and more, what lay beyond. It was logical, progressive, and exhausting.

The mountain of visions loomed in my awareness. So many to consider, impossible to count. I separated the meaningless, the inconsequential, from those important to my life and those I might affect.

In this other space, my eyes opened at the top of a high peak. Beneath me cascaded lower hills, valleys, rivers, and cities with legions of life. In the distance, the glint of a great sea. But I had never processed this kind of information. The fine details of a falling leaf or the drops of melting snow fought to imprison my mind's eye.

To progress through this maze, I had to ignore overwhelming beauty, threatening horror, and fixate on the critical paths extending in multiple directions. Down below, mixed with the ten thousand visions, were uncountable beings in danger. And I had to find out where and how, plan a solution to save them. So much to process, so naive my experience, and so little time.

Inspiration arrived in the world of dreams. Drained of energy, sleep would overpower me often in the days to come. In fantasy, I leapt with imagination to future episodes of heightened significance.

Dominating everything, over and again the next few weeks, was my vision of the melting Earth. It hung in my psyche like some bomb wired to explode. *What was its meaning?* I could not rely on the imagery drawn from reverie. I would have to find my way to that eventual point in a conscious state. Awake, I needed a great effort to forge ahead, skipping careful deliberation, risking the dam breaking over me again.

The time was coming, I knew, when I would have to take this risk. *But not tonight!* I would have to face a lot tomorrow, and I had to face it sane and controlled. The prophecy would come.

Yes, I remembered. Very soon, the prophecy would come.

Chapter 25

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

A day lasts thirty-six hours on the Dram homeworld. This throws the human biological clock pretty out of whack. We can reset at different start points on a twenty-four-hour schedule, but move much from that timetable? We don't do so well.

On this vile planet, I remained in a constant state of surreal suspension, my body never able to adjust. Never sober, never restful in sleep. The perfect physiological counterpoint to my mental swaying between reality and vision.

Their swollen sun burns a feverish, pale scarlet. Not the cozy, warm red of an Earth sunset, but a piercing, unrelenting orange rusting over everything. The glare washed out all other colors of human perception. Only at dawn and dusk would the hue become

a full crimson, far more potent than anything ever witnessed on Earth.

The planet's position limited life in the pre-red giant phase of this system. The surface was just too cold. Life developed beneath the ground, microbial and constrained.

Billions of years later, having chewed through its core hydrogen, the star gorged on outer stores of the gas and expanded, digesting several planets as it bloated. The world became a hothouse jungle for hundreds of millions of years until the gaseous oven baked it to a desert. This ugly radiation rushed Dramian evolution. They became tough, harsh, and unforgiving like the sands. Capable of flowering at times, but all too often bringing misery to those they encountered.

When the door opened the next morning, it was hard for me to determine how long it had been since I laid down. In many ways, it didn't matter. I hadn't slept—like some restless convalescent, I had bobbed up and down the entire night on an ocean of visions. The solid reality of my prison was a bracing contrast.

A small troop tramped into my cell. I loathed their armored and towering insectile anatomy. I didn't need a sixth sense to detect their malice. Behind them followed a Xix with its absurd elegance. A captain of the guard clicked to the dancing alien, and its patrol strode out of the room, reactivating the shield. The barrier hummed, and the polite extraterrestrial bowed to me, seating itself on the ground across from my bed shelf.

I had loosened my connection to the visions as the guards entered. Glancing at the Xixian figure, I raised myself on the platform, dropping my feet to the floor. The fog of the trance lingered as I waited for the creature to speak.

"Greetings, Ambra Dawn! I am Waythrel of Xix, your advocate for the Tribunal."

My *advocate*. Exciting and unexpected. A Xix! I trembled with joy but tried to keep it under control. I took a formal approach.

"I'm very honored and pleased to find you are here on my behalf, Waythrel. I feared one of these hideous bugs would be charged with a halfhearted attempt at defending me."

"The Dram often use my kind in official roles. We are masters of their language and laws and are updated with new tools from our homeworld on a regular schedule. Our usefulness earns us many privileges. Your tone shows you are reckless and do not understand your hosts."

It's warning me. These gentle aliens, always teaching!

My mind raced, remembering the riddle games I played with Thel. *Updated*—it knows about me as promised. *Privileges*—its position as my advocate could be compromised if my captors suspect the Xix are conspiring with me. *Reckless, not understanding*...what did it matter what I said? Unless confidentiality meant nothing. Yes, that was it. The Dram were listening to everything! We had to be careful.

"My teacher was Thel of Xix before my journey here," I began, hoping to convey I was still a student and would do my best to learn. "I am ignorant of many things. Please be patient with me."

Waythrel removed strange devices from pockets in its robe. Several opened to project visual information in discrete planes in the room. Incorporeal screens floated in my cell. Semicircular keyboards materialized for its upper arms, with hundreds of keys for their sinuous extremities. The alien typed in a blur of dancing digits.

"Good, then we may begin. You have much to absorb before the trial, and two Dramian days, or three of your Earth, to prepare. Your very life is at stake, Ambra Dawn. I hope everything I have learned of you is true, because you will need *all* of your talents at the Tribunal."

Was it saying I would have to forecast? As a Xix, it had to realize I couldn't see myself clearly in any future.

"Not for points of law and theology," it continued. "I will handle those as much as is allowed. But for your own questioning. You must understand the context in which you are being examined. I am charged with communicating this and more, and your comprehension is critical." It paused. "Sometimes, I think these translators we make, however powerful, are almost useless. Meaning is always lost in translation. If only there were more direct ways to communicate."

Telepathy. It was telling me to use telepathy! Of course. How else to talk about important yet dangerous topics when those monsters were listening in? Somehow, Thel had communicated this power to Xix. And I had to make it work.

I'd now Read minds and feelings on several occasions but not details. And sending information? Could it be done? Or would I have to speak in this coded way my advocate did? Could I converse like this creature without revealing to the Dram what I was doing? I doubted *that* very much.

"Yes, Waythrel, I think I get what you mean. I am an Earth animal. Please, express your thoughts simply. Strongly. Focusing on the key elements so that I might understand."

If this was going to work, the extraterrestrial would have to dumb things down. A lot. Concentrate on the basic concepts, and not in a complicated alien way. With luck, I could grasp them. I closed my eyes and focused inward, slowing my respiration. The glow of its awareness manifested in front of me. I reached out to the psyche of my advocate.

And recoiled. *The complexity!* The Xixian mind made the Dram seem simple. Crystalline spider webs, a maze of thought weaved through my perception. I shivered.

Braving this unknown, I gravitated toward a brighter gleam. I sensed many ideas but couldn't understand them. Others flared, stripped of filigree. They opened to me, and my thoughts clothed them in images, short memories replaying their content.

Amazed, I waded into small patches of Waythrel's intelligence. A strange memory pulsated over the rest. Odd because the experience was not Waythrel's, but one seen through the eyes of another Xix. The viewpoint exited a hidden chamber in the ship I had piloted through the Orb. The Dram warriors were gone, their warship whisking me away for examination. This unknown Xixian sprinted to the helm after the attack. On arriving, it bent over a prone figure, burnt and mangled, collapsed in a heap beside the navpods.

Thel.

It took all my concentration to continue. I had to force away the emotions threatening to yank me out of this Reading. *Focus.*

The creature touched the fibrous material between Thel's eyestalks. When their membranes met, images gushed from its dying mind. The final few weeks on the ship. The activation of the Orb. Our last words together. All the details poured into the neuronal nexus of this Xix—a life download. Waythrel possessed the memories as well.

You see, part of Thel is within me now, Ambra. With all the Xix. And I know much of what you are and have done. Many of my kind do. We have distributed its experiences.

I heard these thoughts! How would I reach back?

"I'm calmer now," I said, "and ready to learn what you have to teach me. I feel a part of Thel is with me in you."

The alien tipped its writhing mass of eyestalks toward me. I'd reached my mark. When Waythrel spoke, I realized our conversation would be unlike any I had experienced.

"In what I say about Dramian law and custom, you should listen at *two* levels. Strive to comprehend each. From time to time, I will ask you to confirm your understanding of all meanings in this complicated discussion."

The Xix's thoughts echoed in my mind.

I mean, hearing me here as well, Ambra. Please answer affirmative, and nod your head three times if you do.

"Yes, I understand," I said, following the instructions.

"Good. To begin, I will explain some history. A fragile balance exists between the religious and the naturalistic castes on Dram. This division has caused many conflicts, leading to devastating wars. Nevertheless, it has persisted. It is as old as their pre-technological civilization. It is a foundation of the current galactic order."

It is in this divorce of faith and reason our enemies are superficially powerful, but in truth weak. Such an artificial separation of the undivided light of revelation is a sickness of the mind and soul, only too obvious in the myopia and brutality of the Hegemony. Societies unable to believe are sterile. Those without doubt are doomed by arrogance. They sway between them in violence, tearing apart what should be united.

My thoughts were spinning. It was like hearing a conversation in one ear and a commentary in the other. How the Xixian brain could produce both at the same time astonished me. I concentrated and tried to integrate these two streams of information.

"The Holy Orbs are at a core in this conflict. To the religious caste, they represent a revelation in a spiritual dimension. They must be approached in a purified and humble state before the Creator of the universe. The scientific class, the Naturalists, views them as physical manifestations. They seek to harness their power. The Believers view those efforts as sacrilege. Profiteering from the Celestial Spheres is a sin against God. Several millennia ago, when the Dram first encountered the relics of the Ancient Ones, this dispute erupted into a civil war. The conflict exterminated one-fourth of their population."

Remember, Ambra, any species able to turn on its own kind with such malevolence will, with much less deliberation, ruin and slaughter those very different from them.

Part of me squirmed, thinking about the actions of humanity. Our repeated descents into massacre. Were we any better?

We must focus on the Orbs. The Tribunal will decide your fate, your life, and the manner of your death, based on how they view their manipulation.

"Are you following me so far?"

"Yes," I said, the implications clear.

We of Xix feel there is no safe judgment for you. If the Believers prevail, it will be torture and execution for heresy and sacrilege. If the Naturalists win the day, it will be mental enslavement to harness your power.

The alien's many eyes bored into me. Prismatic sprays burst from its thought structure like fireworks.

We are convinced of your worth to the Resistance. Therefore, we are planning a terrible risk. To save you, we will intervene on your behalf and subject ourselves to the wrath of the Dram. Please nod three times to show you have heard and understand.

Waythrel's thoughts rattled my soul. An entire species risking itself for a single alien creature? I struggled, somehow managing to move my head and respond.

"I don't want to see extermination, Waythrel."

The Xixian advocate bowed toward me. "In all such sacrifice, there is the belief a higher purpose is served. In this motivation, you may comprehend difficult choices, challenging actions."

I cannot yet tell you what we will do. We have placed ourselves in numerous critical positions across Dram. The Xix can, therefore, manipulate much to our designs. But we need time. To plan thoroughly, because for so many reasons, we must not fail.

"At the Tribunal, you will be questioned by advocates from each caste. They will then debate your fate before the high inquisitor."

"Who's that?"

"The inquisitor holds an office created thousands of years ago

to aid in mediation among the castes. The station is second in power to the emperor. The laws grant this individual enormous influence to balance culture between the Believers and Naturalists. The inquisitor is required to originate from one of the Isolation Zones. These areas on the planet are neutral ground, where the differing teachings are withheld until the Dram therein pass the age of maturity. This is to ensure no bias in judgments."

And therefore, this position is one of the most corrupt in the system. Substantial bribes are the norm. Those seeking appointment too often are hungry for such benefits. Beware the high inquisitor!

"Tomorrow, you will be brought before the inquisitor for an assessment in advance of the Tribunal. Here, you may receive offers of clemency should you acquiesce to the emperor's will."

So much information! Facts I needed to internalize and consider. But I couldn't. I was reeling from the offer of Waythrel to save me. They believed I could help them rescue thousands of worlds. Stop the Dram. But my intuition spoke that it would mean certain death for the Xix, whether or not I was what they hoped. I wouldn't be a savior. I'd be a murderer, responsible for the destruction of an entire species, the brightest and kindest and wisest I had encountered.

What to do? My heart rebelled against the Xixian plan. It couldn't be right. My mind dashed forward in spacetime like some mad thing. I was heedless. I stopped fearing those complex webs that had nearly killed me the last time. I *had* to see enough of the best possible future to know what to do!

Ambra, we of Xix will risk much. All. You must promise us you will do everything within your power to follow our instructions. I will come back with details. I need you to tell me now that you understand and commit to us.

What could I do? I couldn't lie, not to the Xix, not in this situation. But I could *not* let them do this. I steeled myself. What I *could* do was go along with their scheme until I developed a better

one. The Tribunal was in seventy-two hours. I had to find a way out of this nightmare, as I did with the Orb. This time I wouldn't be so naive. I wouldn't jump from one trap into another. This time, there would be no mistakes.

Ambra? Did you hear me? Please respond.

I tottered, shaking with emotion. What happened next was over before I realized it had begun. It opened the final door to the destiny that awaited me.

As my heart constricted and my thoughts raced, my emotions leapt through my sixth sense. My tumor stretched out its ghostly hand and touched Waythrel.

The alien shivered and recoiled. Its intricate mental web jostled. Anxiety, surprise, and awe emanated from the Xix. The bright webs reassembled into new and delicate patterns.

Ambra Dawn, what have you done?

What *had* I done? I didn't have an answer. Its reaction—had I caused it? How? I looked in confusion over toward the creature.

You have entered my mind. Your cognition impressed into my consciousness. It paused again in thought. *We never expected this. Thel underestimated your potential.*

"Waythrel, please. I'm not sure I've understood everything that you have told me today."

"You have grasped much, I do not doubt. And we will speak more tomorrow."

Its thoughts continued to echo in my awareness.

What has happened is as important as your power with the Orbs. I must report this immediately and seek advice. It makes you far more dangerous, even to us, than anyone could have envisioned.

Waythrel's alien intellect emitted odd and confusing images. The notions behind them bewildered me.

It means you not only Read. You also do something few have dared suggest might someday be possible. You touched my mind, its processes—my consciousness. Remember your lessons with Thel! To

alter my cognition implies that you can modify spacetime itself. This is unprecedented. It is terrifying. No one knows where such power could lead. You are not merely a Reader. You are a Writer. The first Writer.

"Until tomorrow, Ambra Dawn. Think about what I have told you."

Waythrel signaled to the guards, who disarmed the shield, and let the lanky Xixian past. I curled up on my bed, wrecked from today's efforts and now stunned by this recent exchange.

A Writer?

From the sheer slopes of future vision, I sensed an avalanche careening towards us.

Chapter 26

Nothing is more despicable than respect based on fear.

Albert Camus

The red starlight waxed and waned. Invading, its tentacles pushed with a relentless will through my small force field window on the far wall. But the hateful light bothered me less than before. I was abstracted, diving into future memories. Sifting, panning filtering. Revealing patterns of possible futures. Paths through potential toward the goals I sought —escape, freedom, and preserving lives.

Waythrel returned several times over the next day. My withdrawal distressed it, and the Xix questioned me. But I dared not explain why to my advocate. I absorbed its lessons to some degree, the alien commenting on my growing powers to probe minds. But as I worked my way through the future's maze, the absurdities of Dram became less important. Most of the details around my future self I could not see. I ignored those I could perceive to find a path home, one with the least suffering.

I did learn that my alterations of Waythrel's mind, the imprint of my own thoughts in its own, hadn't done any damage. The Xixian medics scanned the organ in the alien's chest and had detected nothing unusual. They concluded that this telepathic power I summoned was something like an external stimulus. Light to eyes. Sound to ears. But Waythrel was uneasy, voicing concerns that it need not be so. And with the ability to modify spacetime itself, all the Xix were troubled. How would my powers continue to develop?

What mattered to me was that I got us out of this. And I had seen enough. In the paths where I did nothing, where others took the lead, untold carnage and chaos would follow. Genocidal fires would smolder across a thousand worlds in a galactic war.

Not that way. I began to discern another future in the jungle of time. A safer path. *Safe for many*. A great tragedy loomed over the time horizon in my consciousness, but it was distant and not dependent on what I could do. It was beyond my abilities to stop. I would face it as I had to.

As I struggled to find answers, the hour arrived for my audience with the high inquisitor. A large troop of Dram in military formals escorted us. We zipped through the detention zone, flying across bleak deserts on ground transports. Stopping before a high tower, we were marched into the chambers of the inquisitor.

An unimposing insect occupied the office. One might call it a runt if it weren't still over six feet tall. It was old, its slow movements the giveaway. Or so it seemed to an alien life-form like me, who had trouble distinguishing the signs of aging in another species. The bug was perched above us behind a green and gold counter. An overdone judge's bench. It looked down on us—literally and figuratively—during this short but informative *assessment*.

They shoved us before the thing. A small claustrophobic space separated us from the Dram guard. Everything was larger than me.

The seven-foot-tall guards, the elevated judge, and my advocate. What did it matter? I had my own strengths.

My counsel would try to have the Tribunal abolished but had little hope of that happening. My Orb manipulation was documented with precision scientific instruments. This made me a center of questions for power and religion in the Hegemony. Waythrel and the bug exchanged clicks for at least ten minutes. After their discussion, the high inquisitor waved off the Xix and addressed me.

"You have been informed of the charges?" The translator was of Xixian manufacture. An unusual choice for the Dram, who were suspicious of foreign devices. They most often chose to use their own far inferior machines. Unless they were dying and needed superior medics, of course. Or, in this case, when a member was less intimidated. My advocate had told me this mentally early on in the assessment.

Whatever it pretends to be, this one is a Naturalist. Only one very comfortable with technology would wear one of our translators. It will seek an arrangement with you to reveal your powers over the Orbs.

"Yes," I responded to the Dram above me.

"Would you repeat them for the inquisitor."

"I am charged with High Sacrilege in the contamination of the Holy Orbs by an impure species."

"And do you know the penalty for such a crime?"

"Purification, and then death." Meaning torment and execution if the torture didn't kill me first.

"There are other ways, human."

Here comes the offer. Please hear my thoughts on this before you answer.

The giant insect pressed a button. Lights dimmed as a cone of energy enveloped the three of us, leaving the guards outside.

A cloaking shield, Ambra. No one can overhear or record what

happens inside. The inquisitor is protecting itself from what it is about to say.

"The emperor is very keen that the Hegemony possesses the power you have revealed. Some of us share a more enlightened view of your deeds than others on our world. While they may prevail in the trial, we would have it otherwise. And if you will agree to our terms, the Holy Office of the Sovereign has the authority to annul the Tribunal."

"And if I refuse?"

Ambra! Wait, I said!

"Then you will find yourself at the mercy of the judges," spit the insect. Anger radiated from its consciousness. "And should the Naturalists triumph, you will receive less kindness in your service to them."

The stupid fool. Already I could sense all the lies. I would suffer no matter what they said or promised. They would enslave me, recoil from no indecency to my person in attempting to extract the knowledge they desired.

This is an important political juncture, came Waythrel's thoughts. *If we can bypass the Tribunal, it will buy us considerable time and the momentary facade of better treatment. I suggest you accept its offer. Let me express this to the Dram.*

No! I shouted into its brain.

My advocate paused, disoriented from the impact of my angry thoughts. I stepped forward and growled at the inquisitor.

"Should I agree to your terms, you will just place me in superior conditions for a time before ripping my mind apart. Turning me into a lab rat on which you will work and likely fail to extract the secret you desire. No! I will risk a kinder death in torture. I will not help the galaxy's fiends and murderers. Tell your emperor a lowly Earthling spits in his face."

My advocate had recovered by that point, and I sensed its overwhelming shock and panic. The anxious Xix thought the high

inquisitor would have me executed on the spot for this. Almost right. So much rage boiled out of the creature from my outburst. But I had seen the bright path to safety, and it did not end here.

Soon, Waythrel, you'll understand. Poor thing, it would be so hard to explain.

The insect clicked, and the guards were ushering us back to my cell. As it uttered those commands, I had withdrawn. Seeing the luminous road, I understood more and more what was required. Waythrel shouted at me on the return trip, its eyestalks whipping in many directions. Little of it entered my awareness.

Surprising myself, I spoke out loud in the relative safety of the noisy ground car. A stream of consciousness gushed out. My mind's eye ignored the surrounding reality, focusing on the coming futures.

"They will fight over me, and the Naturalists will prevail."

"What are you talking about?" it asked.

"Not even religious dogma can win over the chance for new powers. I see them, those conniving, backbiting fools. Scheming, drunk on potency. But it will be a prelude to a greater movement, and then, a crescendo of joy and heartache."

"Ambra, please, what..."

I turned my face toward my advocate, tears trickling down my face. I didn't see the alien next to me. My mind was overflowing with the vast horror before my unique sense in time.

"I can't *look*, Waythrel. I can't let myself look at the sadness, even though I know what I will see!"

We sat in silence for the rest of the trip to my cell. Just as well —I was somewhere else, anyway.

Chapter 27

In this playhouse of infinite forms I have had my play, and here have I caught sight of that which is formless.

Rabindranath Tagore

When Waythrel next visited, it was a while before it could rouse me. I lay on my bed shelf with open eyes, my mouth half closed, drool along the side of my face. At first, the alien misunderstood. The tender skin where the laser had sealed the surgical incision leaked some blood, staining my clothes.

"Ambra, wake up! What have they done to you? Are you drugged? Have they tampered with your mind? Answer me!" The distressed Xix shook me with its upper arms, eyestalks darting about in a panic. A detached part of my awareness watched it speak into a communicator. An uncertain period passed and Xixian medics surrounded me.

"She is not currently medicated," I understood one to say, whether through a translator or through my telepathy, I'm not

sure. “Remnants of a human narcotic are present, but at such low levels, they cannot be affecting her now. Furthermore, there is no intervention anywhere else except the abdomen. Her brain is untouched.”

“Why is she like this, then? She has to be at the Tribunal in four hours!”

“The visions,” I rasped. “They have never opened to me like this before.” I swallowed, my throat dry, my words croaking out. “Infinite layers and webs inside of membranes. I must control my exploration. It’s too easy to be lost in it.”

“Ambra, what are you talking about? What have they done to you?”

Drops clouded my eyes. Tears for myself, for the others I had seen, for the history and future of pain and injustices that cannot possibly be balanced, even by all the love in the universe.

“My eggs, Waythrel,” I said, angling my head toward them. “You didn’t think they would risk losing me if things go wrong at the Tribunal or afterwards.”

“Your eggs.” A statement. I could *sense* the wheels turning in its mind.

“Last night, they came, threw me on a table, cut me open, and took them. My possible children, taken from me before they could exist.”

Sobs spasmed my chest. I had never thought much about breeding, especially with my deformity. I mean, let’s be honest, what mate would have this? But I had never thought I would be invaded and robbed, violated. With this act, the Dram had defiled something primal. My soul mourned. It howled to the heavens, decrying what else would be stolen.

The Xixian medics scanned the areas where my ovaries were and confirmed the results.

“I am sorry, Ambra,” Waythrel began. “We did not anticipate this. Once again, we have been naive in imagining what they might

conspire to. It is obvious on reflection. They want more genetic material to breed out your powers again. They could not clone you—human chromosomal instability has yet to be solved by any species in the galaxy. But your eggs—they could inseminate them with diverse sperm from males similar to your father. They have been plotting far ahead." It paused and repeated, "I am very sorry."

"We couldn't have stopped it," I moaned, trying to rise. "Not now, not with larger tasks waiting."

"What tasks, Ambra?"

"It's all becoming clear. A straight path home." I laughed, a bitter bile clogged in my throat. "No! Oh, *God*, no. Not home. Never home. But escape."

"Have you *read* this? The Xixian Council is formulating a final rescue plan. We suspect the worst for us and are evacuating many of our kind in secrecy. But if you have seen our future, you *must* tell us."

I smiled at the lanky alien. "It's alright, Waythrel. It will be okay. I'm seeing to it."

"You're seeing to it? Please, these stakes are too high for such riddles."

My thoughts phased between the present and the coming possibilities. "Don't press me. A few loose strands left to tie up now, and the path is sure. Can't...rush like...before. Need to see... *all* the routes."

I floated in and out of a trance for the next hours with bothered Xix flitting about me.

Time plodded in my cell but jittered through my consciousness. Events stormed past with hurricane winds. Roads and doors to the future sang in counterpoint, arias arcing across my awareness.

How the puzzle resolved is unclear to me, but after too many headaches, at a single point, two different melodies of time met.

Out of the myriad strings of the *perhaps* emerged a unified thread of *destiny*. It sounds absurd, but that's the best I can describe it. I opened my eyes, seeing the future and my present, a superimposed harmony.

The Dram guard entered. They paraded us to the Tribunal.

Along the way, my mouth sprinted in a stream of consciousness. I'm sure it sounded like nonsense to Waythrel. The poor Xix feared I had gone mad at the most inopportune time. We were minutes before the trial, hours until the Xixian plan was set in motion. A hostile and hideous world caged us at the center of the Hegemony.

I chanted to the smelted landscape. "It will never be the same."

The dunes shimmered in a scarlet furnace, devoid of greens, blues, and yellows. Buildings blurred past us as the ground vehicle blasted by.

"A fetus as a single grain of sand. Twenty billion souls burned, ruptured in a moment of time. All *gravity*. So simple, *inverse square.* Spacetime bending and killing. Epochs within eras inside eons spinning, one long orbit after another, a stupid planet wannabe. Waiting to waste an entire world. Bastards—they will debate their creed while slitting a baby's throat."

The Xix tried to have the Tribunal postponed, but the Dram would hear nothing of it. Of course, my mental state signified little in these proceedings. It wasn't about truth or fairness. It was about their power struggle, laws, and creeds. There wouldn't be a part for me to play in the rude sham besides attending. My poor advocate would be reduced to listening to the blowhards bicker.

"I'm ready, Waythrel. This toy trial is a proud gasp in the face of the infinite. The only thing I dread is the awful waste of time it all is. I wish I could replace one piece of time with another."

The alien stared in my direction with its many eyes. I was too engrossed in thought to bother trying to sense its state of mind. I'm sure it was pretty bad.

Chapter 28

Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.

Blaise Pascal

The audience before the high inquisitor had been impressive, but nothing prepared me for the Tribunal.

Our escorts pulled alongside a giant dome. The venue had *Galactic Empire* written all over it. The monstrosity rivaled the size of an Earth metropolis. The Dram's favorite luminescent, marble-like substance coated the exterior. The worker bees had carved and polished the gleaming surface to a million facets. They reflected the bloody light of the star like a gargantuan incandescent bulb. I suppose to give it the appearance of power radiating from within. I found it hideous and tacky. My only astonishment rose from the incessant, forceful assault these brutes inflicted on the cosmos.

They floated us through an enormous corridor on levitation flats, small rectangular devices with guardrails. They sped a few

feet above the ground. Of course, the engineers designed them for the Dram. An average human would have trouble grasping the rails. At my five foot two, the only support was a post to grip. At least the transports were bump-free. Still, they moved pretty fast, and instinct made me cling to the odd metal.

The tunnel fused with a mini-dome onion couched within the main vault, yet still the size of a football field. It was absurd. In the center of this extravaganza was an elevated platform, two hundred feet in the air. My advocate and I would stand there for the entire ordeal.

An enormous stage hovered over us. Decorated in confusing Dramian aesthetics, it held the seats of the Tribunal members. Waythrel and I had to crane our gaze toward them, their chairs arrayed in a semicircle above us. The far walls were dim. The design focused light on our smaller perch, leaving most of the chamber in darkness. The exceptions were the seat of the high inquisitor, and towering overhead, the grand throne on which the emperor sat.

The purpose was simple to discern—weaken the psychology of the accused. Show us how small and base we were, bolster their inherent sense of superiority. My own nature inverted their goals. It was, in some ways, the final sign of how psychotic these creatures were. At that point, I lost whatever hope I had to find another escape. It was my plan or endure a journey through Dram hell.

Beyond this conviction, it had the effect of increasing my confidence. They were so unbalanced, it would not be hard to defeat such enemies. This room was the proof. The aliens sacrificed anything of practical value for pageantry. The scale of the thing was so large it was impossible to see the members of the Tribunal from the platform. Nor could they see us. So, they had rigged giant suspended holograms to display each participant, like

monitors in Times Square. I swallowed a chuckle at how ludicrous this farce had become.

I suppose I should have been more respectful. They were smarter than me. Much more powerful than any other species. And, of course, quite willing to do terrible things. But it wasn't me who was blind now. I had sight in a world where the rest stumbled.

The emperor's hologram dangled before us. Blown up tenfold, its already large size in the projection, I knew the monster well. Its form and clothing were familiar from my vision on Earth, from a time in my life that seemed an eon ago. It clicked commands as Waythrel and I settled onto the platform, bathed in light. The clicks rocked against my ears, amplified by alien technology. The Tribunal was in session.

Eight hours that insipid slogfest lumbered on. I will spare you the details. Constant religious and legal back-and-forth dominated between the high inquisitor, appointed advocates of the Naturalists and Believers. In my sound cone, it spewed over me in nauseating Dramian translation.

The Believers presented their case. The evidence recorded by their sensors of my manipulation of the Orbs. The original notes from Earth about my abilities. A brief questioning of Waythrel and me about whether I had indeed done these things ("Yup!").

Their derision polluted my senses. Many in the Believer camp had a lot of trouble *believing* a simple human could have power over the Holy Orbs. *An unclean creature with such gifts?* They exhausted everyone, arguing the impossibility. They focused on my deformity, my imperfections and blindness. "This animal is even a monster among its own kind!" exclaimed one particularly empathetic opposing counsel.

Their case was pretty easy to understand. I was an instrument of evil. A vile, corrupted beast empowered by dark forces to sacrilege. How else could a base and deformed hunk of sentience have

any legitimate control over the Celestial Spheres? There could be no cooperation with me, nothing good to come from my actions. *Purification!* They must cleanse me and the universe of the malevolence possessing me. Send me to my death for my sins and prevent any further desecration of the Orbs.

Anyway, that's the English summary. Maybe it sounded less stone-age in the original Dram.

The Naturalists asserted their position. They countered by casting my malformations in a positive light (thanks, guys!). The Creator had no doubt endowed me with transformative gifts, a new organ of vision. They feigned a false respect for the Believers' faith. Who could judge the divine instrument of revelation? Did not the ancient texts claim even the lowest would see salvation? Had I not opened a portal? How could anything evil have done so? How could good have allowed it?

Their deceit was so palpable, no sixth sense was needed to realize what charlatans they were. They argued for a break from the barbaric interpretations of the past. It was time for a more progressive, enlightened interpretation of scriptures. They suggested, and I'm not kidding, that *God* had sent me. The Holy Queen Bee or whatever they believed (sorry, Waythrel, wasn't paying attention) conjured me from the clay *for a purpose*! The Dram could not reject the divine gift. They must use this transcendent instrument and discover that reason.

On it went between them. I zoned out. With the insect clicking as background, I finalized in my mind the dramatics of the next few days. The dancing futures of my visions—these were real. The bickering bugs? Their power struggles and ancient superstitions? That was the true dream, or nightmare.

Drowned in thought, ignored during the long debates, I missed the ceremonial signals. Waythrel shook me back into the present. They were nearing an end. The Dram leader ordered the advocates to sit. The high inquisitor shimmered in holodisplay.

"Finally. Let him spit it out," I muttered to my counsel.

"The sovereign has signaled closure. The debate has ended. All hail the judge and receive judgment!"

The bug sat, and the projection flicked to the craggy form of the head insect. *Ancient*. Despite my ignorance of alien physiology, I could tell the emperor was aged. The bent legs, the poor posture, the discolorations in the exoskeleton, the jerky movements. Decades had sanded and chipped away at this creature. But its spirit did not shake. A sharpness pricked through its words, persistent through translation. Sharp in essence, but not in effect. I sighed. I had heard the speech so many times already.

"The evidence and arguments have been presented. But there is still too much mystery. A primitive soul is said to have control over the Holy Orbs. Yet it shows no sign of the faith, no knowledge of the Ancient Ones. How can divine power have come to such a vulgar beast? How can we know it was this Earthling who opened the portal, and not another force assigning the act to it to divert attention?"

Waythrel stiffened beside me. The Xix had not anticipated this level of paranoia. To blame them because of their superior technology—classic Dram. But deadly serious.

"We need further proof!" Soft clicking could be heard around the chamber. "I command this prisoner provide the Tribunal with a demonstration! In four days, we mark the end of the Sun Spot Cycle. It is a holy omen. We will travel to the Sacred Orb. This creature will show us the truth of its claims or perish in torment for its heresy!"

Several in the Believer camp broke out in some kind of protest. I sensed the Naturalists swell with pleasure. The ugly roach was clever. It would test whether I held this power, and at the same time establish a use of it by the Dram. It would simplify its efforts to convince the Believer caste to exploit my abilities.

"Silence!" the emperor thundered, pounding a clawed hand

on the throne. “I am empowered by the Divine Legions and rule with their authority! I *command* it. In four days, this creature will be brought before the Holy Orb. Take them away.”

And it was over. The guards entered and hurried us out of the chamber. They herded us from the absurd dome toward the ground transports. The Xix shielded its many eyes from the outdoor light, bright and searing after our hours in the dark Tribunal. The noise of the city filled the surrounding spaces.

I leaned against the exhausted alien and whispered, “Now that we’ve endured their hot air, we have plans to set in motion.”

Eyestalks converged on me. “Plans?”

“Yes, Waythrel.” I exhaled, my lips morphing into a wry smile. It was good to confess at last.

“Soon, we will escape, and there is a lot we need to arrange. We must make sure it is as I have fore-planned.”

“Ambra, you will tell me now what you have seen?”

“Oh, Waythrel, that would take more than our lifetimes. But a local corner of it all, yes, I’ll tell you. These arrogant bugs, they are going to lead us right to the exit.”

Chapter 29

It is incomprehensible that God should exist, and it is incomprehensible that He should not exist; that the soul should be joined to the body, and that we should have no soul; that the world should be created, and that it should not be created.

Blaise Pascal

The escape through the labyrinth glittered. It was a luminescent highway to my mind's eye. A thousand different threads of the possible futures woven together. It dominated my visions.

In my present, I helped lay each new thread. With my alien accomplices, I stitched the near future, assembled its components. The optimal route positioned the correct choices in front of me. Choices well within my powers to accomplish.

You must understand—it was my decision to walk this terrible path. Never believe otherwise. I will not forget my sins. Through that riotous road was our escape, yes. Along that dark-bright lane, the Xix would survive. By that nightmare passage, I could avert the

coming galactic genocides. At its end, I would return to where my journey began. And there, I would be condemned.

By telepathy, I requested that Waythrel ready all of its kind on Dram, and beyond, all who could exchange information and service with their homeworld. They must prepare for what I would ask of them. The alien deferred to my visions. I sensed a growing helplessness and resignation from it as I took over the planning of our escape. They assumed I would demand something like their own plan of species-sacrifice. The irony was not lost on me.

My first request was to speak in the open, without the bugs overhearing. I wanted words. Spoken sounds I could feel on the tips of my teeth. Telepathy was amazing, but I'd spent most of my life with speech. For what was coming, I needed the familiar.

The next day, Waythrel and several Xixian medics entered my cell. Pretending to examine me, one injected something into my arm. I held silent and waited until they left the room. My advocate spoke.

"We have implanted in your skin a small device. It will mask our conversation from the surveillance. I have a similar one in me. The implant is organic. It will dissolve, your tissues absorbing the constituent molecules within thirty minutes. Undetectable. They mimic malfunctioning eavesdropping equipment. It gives us a short time to speak unconcerned. Say now, all you must say."

I closed my eyes, focusing on the painful path in my consciousness.

"When they bring me to the Orb, the emperor will demand I activate it, planning for me to guide the ship to Earth. A measure of the cruelty of the Dram." My voice was monotonic, my emotions frozen. "But this will not happen. The Resistance will swing into place and attack the escort ships. They have been moving into near jump space the last few days."

"I have received no word of those plans. What are you saying? Why would they travel to your homeworld?"

I ignored its words and continued. "At that time, a delegation of Xixian scientists on board will be revealed to be defenders. They will immobilize the soldiers."

"Ambra, please..."

"Listen to me, Waythrel." I shook my head. The alien would have to trust my visions. "The Dram have too many troops and terrible weapons. The Xix cannot handle them all." I smiled, thinking of my gentle friends. "These others, I will stop."

"*You* will stop? How?"

I concentrated on the pulsing waves of thought emanating from the creature. Complex lines, beautiful weavings within webs. So much more refined and deep than my intelligence, theirs burst in a spectrum of color. Yet despite their far superior brains, they stumbled in this terrain. Only I could see such thoughts.

And only I could touch them. I reached out, kindly but firmly, and plucked a thread.

It recoiled as if struck. The elegant filigree of thought dissolved. Scrambling, its body reacted in reflex, many arms extending to balance along the walls of my cell. The eyestalks whirled around the room, unhinged, disoriented.

The disarray decayed. The web reformed. The long alien form relaxed. The eyes calmed and turned toward me, one after the other. I lowered my head.

"I'm sorry. You would not have believed me otherwise."

"You frighten me, Ambra."

"I know. It's too much power for an Earth mind. I *feel* the truth of it inside. Seeing our history, I *know* it—we are not wise or decent enough. But this ability *is* mine, good or bad. Maybe both."

I raised my head and leveled my sightless eyes with my advocate. "And I was gentle. I don't have to be so kind." It recoiled

from my implication. “Our enemies will be helpless, at least the number around us on the ship. I can handle those numbers. They won’t understand what’s happening before I’ve incapacitated them all.”

I shook my head in disbelief at where things had brought me. “I have seen it all. You must have faith in me. Report my words back to the Resistance. The Dram will want Xixian scientists there to try to explain and capture the mystery of my power over the Orbs. It’s a dark joke—they need you, even as they don’t trust you! Fill their ranks with fighters. Tell the human who plans with you what I have said.”

“The human?” it asked. “How do you know?”

“I can *see* him, Waythrel. I can see him in my future, and I can see him as a distortion in the matrices of spacetime. Thel’s little seeds are sprouting. I can’t even keep track of them as they grow inside me. Soon, we will go to him and to the core of the Resistance. I will meet him before the end.”

“The end?”

“Of many things. The beginning of the end of the Dram.”

“If this is true, then my heart will rejoice.”

“Stop being silly, Waythrel.” I smiled. “You don’t even have a heart! Your translators are too poetic.”

“The sentiment is the same.”

A merciless weight constricted my lungs, and I fought for control over my emotions.

“Yes, but grief will tarnish so much. Terrible sorrow. Tomorrow we head for Earth, but we will not find it.”

Chapter 30

Space has a reality outside our minds, so that we cannot completely prescribe its properties a priori.

Carl Friedrich Gauss

The trip into space was far grander than anything I had experienced. After the Sortax, the nightmare in the smugglers' death holds, and the recent detention cell in the Dram warship, the emperor's titanic yacht was a majestic, luxury starcraft in comparison. It was the largest ship I'd flown on, at least twenty times the size of the training craft. The energy needed to bring it out of the planet's gravity must have been colossal.

Inside, they had spared no effort in creating an opulent transport for the ruler of the galaxy. Spacious corridors of plush fabrics led to high ceilings in rooms housing the most complex technology. Everything decorated with the finest materials. Dram-style art hung from the walls. They preferred weavings from desert plants. Their artisans shaped them into carpet-like hangings painted with

historical and mythological images. They meant little to me and often were hard to decipher. I suppose human paintings would be equal nonsense to alien life.

We weren't given long to observe. The guards tramped us to the bridge where the emperor and its entourage waited. The ship ascended into space. Artificial gravity quashed any g-forces during acceleration and other tech removed all turbulence in the atmosphere. We rose into the sky, still and tranquil, not a bump or stomach sickness to be had. In orbit, it felt no different from on the ground.

Soldiers prodded us into the enormous command center. Mammoth panoramic windows covered the walls, revealing the blackness and pinpricks of distant starlight. I marveled at the engineering. Their advanced science produced remarkable glass—if glass was what it was. These gigantic apertures withstood pressure and temperature differences from the air inside to the vacuum of space. Whatever the material was, it was tough or aided by a protective energy field. It sure made for a spectacular sight. The scene produced the sensation of floating in front of the ship in the darkness.

The panes darkened as the system's star swung into view, dimming its oppressive orange. Without the shaded windows obscuring the light, the flaming giant would have fried us all. The starship continued its course. The sun arced across the transparent walls as shadows shifted from one side to the other.

The bugs dragged us to a raised platform at the foot of the throne. That's how they granted access to supplicants before the emperor. Again, the symbolic power elements in their design—grandeur about us, height above us, freedom denied us. Fifteen Xixian scientists hunched over various pieces of equipment. I hoped these were not true researchers, but a team trained for combat. I glanced toward Waythrel and probed its thoughts. It anticipated my concern and formed the answers to my question.

The forces are in place, as you have requested, Ambra. So are the emperor's troops, as you have noticed. There are at least forty of their elite guard. I hope you are prepared for this.

I impressed on its mind that I was.

The Xix continued. *The Resistance will be here on my signal through the Dram Orb string. Once given, they will make the jump into the system. We will have a few minutes to escape from this ship and board a fast freighter. At any moment, our craft could be destroyed by a warship. It will be perilous. And finally, what of the emperor? We dare not risk it injury. It could mean terrible retaliation.*

I smiled and spoke out loud. "Don't worry. It won't be pretty, but we'll be okay."

Waythrel acknowledged me by bending several eyestalks in my direction. Alien sarcasm! Well, I couldn't blame the poor Xix. I was the one-eyed woman leading the blind.

I sensed it before anyone else at the helm. Nothing in the galaxy compares to an Orb. Not even the complexities of the Xixian mind matched the intricate maze of radiance churning beneath the surface of the spheres.

The local spacetime distortions extending from the object caressed my unique organ. They touched so much in the star system. I had noticed the projections in the past, but didn't know what to make of them. Now it was more clear. The charged coils crept with purpose: tending, *gardening*. The majority of their glimmer cupping the Dram home planet. Thel had spoken of it. *Gardeners*. Could it be true? The energies reached through my body, and a tremor rattled me. What were those tendrils *doing*?

Waythrel sensed my reaction. "What is it, Ambra?"

"We're close," I managed, my throat parched.

Officers clicked to the emperor, signaling to the viewports. The Orb expanded to fill the massive windows as the ship neared.

In the visual realm, what poverty! But scarcity in a spectrum of splendor could still amaze.

Awe stirred in the surrounding minds. Some religious, some scientific, but all knew the power gestating within what we approached. These were portals through time and space, planted throughout the galaxy by the mysterious Ancient Ones. Abandoned for billions of years, young species had stumbled upon them. They were used by the inhabitants of worlds too primitive to understand how they functioned. Or why.

My new Xixian translator echoed the emperor's tones. "We have reached the Sacred Sphere of Dram! It is time for the heretic to prove its truth and worth. It will activate the Orb and reveal the potency of the divine or fail and expose itself to be a fraud of the evil force."

How I hated these dramatic moments of voodoo. Their leader's hypocrisy increased my disgust. A sanctimonious sham mixed with extreme power—nothing was worse. Especially when those authorities could soon be deciding exactly how to dismember you.

The bug turned to Waythrel. "Order the human to open the portal."

"Ambra, obey the sovereign's command."

I inhaled, closing my eyes. *Okay, buddy, get ready, 'cause here it comes!*

I sank inside myself, descending to a place where my unique perspective blossomed and occupied all my consciousness. Perceived by my sixth sense, the Orb flared like a supernova, its energies overpowering. I held steady, focused, and reached toward it.

This time, it was more straightforward. The pressures were far weaker without a Dram warship chasing you through space. My powers had ripened since I had opened the last Orb. And future memories gave me an unshakable confidence. I had seen my

success on the bright-dark path. All I had to do was dance with destiny.

As I unlocked the Orb, I sensed fear and reverence, even from Waythrel. Visually, it was a spectacular light show. The dim surface rippled into a multidimensional maze of coherent radiance. A many layered tunnel erupted beside the gigantic craft. It seemed poised to swallow the ship whole.

As indeed it was.

I concentrated on keeping the Orb open but preventing it from engulfing the starcraft. The spacetime tugs yanked on the flesh of those around me. A subtle anxiety bubbled within the host.

I opened my eyes and glared at the ugly cockroach on the throne. "There, *Your Majesty*," I spat out. "Is this what you were looking for?"

The emperor and Dram servants were too transfixed to hear me. The guards also gawked at the heaven-hell of the ceaseless and structured splendor of the Orb. To my satisfaction, the Xixian team did not.

I spoke mentally to Waythrel to send the signal. It touched a device attached to the translator around its neck, transmitting both to the Resistance and the forces below.

And that's when everything went nuts.

Chapter 31

Battle not with monsters, lest you become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Moments passed until the Dram realized what was happening.

The Xixian fighters immobilized our enemy, but did not kill. They targeted the insect warriors with special devices they had concealed. As the giant bugs dropped to the ground, a cry rose from crew monitoring space. I'm not sure what they had detected. Waythrel's signal? The small Resistance fleet materializing from the String? The opening salvo on surrounding warships escorting their leader's vessel?

Whatever the reason, I had to act before they turned the firepower of the great ship on the emerging craft. I had instructed our allies not to fire on the emperor's transport. They obeyed my instructions. How could they not? Their *savior* was onboard.

They were here for me. They had to get the Orb-opener off this yacht and safely away.

I spun and faced the rows of technicians, pilots, and weapons staff. Their intense thoughts in the midst of combat slashed at my awareness, a brightness betraying their presence.

If they only knew.

One by one, I struck them. My consciousness morphed into a great lens, focusing mental activity. I delivered a mind-slap unknown to these creatures, one they had no preparation or training to resist. I first incapacitated the row of Dram at the consoles. A second or two for each, and then the next, and so, like dominoes, I dropped them.

I turned to the soldiers who engaged the Resistance forces in a deadly melee. The Xix had performed well, and piles of stunned shapes lay in front of them. But the insects were like ants from a nest, pouring in through the many doors along the walls of the room. They overwhelmed our team, who toppled, charred and twitching, in a growing wreckage.

I improvised, my thoughts burning hyperkinetic. With a vast mental sweep, I summoned a stream of potency from a quiescent sea. My burst of cognitive distortion raked across the hordes of Dram soldiers. Scores dropped, most never to move again. Another horde flooded through the main entrance. I recalibrated and released another storm. All but a handful struck the floor. Those remaining staggered, unable to function. They wandered about the room before collapsing. I had mangled their minds.

A venomous and hateful urge to strike radiated through my awareness. *The emperor*. My consciousness filled with the thoughts of the monster who had hurt so many. *It knew.* In rage, it thrust a weapon toward me, waiting for no Tribunal to decide my fate.

Funny, I had not foreseen this detail in the visions. Too close to my person, I suppose.

Waythrel screamed, "Ambra! Behind you!"

Poor Xix, so worried. By the time I turned to face the galaxy's monarch, my advocate emitted shock and awe, gawking with its eighteen eyes.

The royal beast stood still, its upraised claw clutching a device aimed at my face. It gasped for air, unmoving. Its pocked exoskeleton trembled with a tremendous effort to break the invisible bonds trapping it.

I glided to the insect, staring into its foul eyes.

"Sovereign of all Dram!" I shouted. "Now you will hear *me*." Hatred burned my soul. I unleashed thunder in its mind: *One way or the other!*

The emperor tensed as my anger slapped at its consciousness, and fear flowed toward me like an iced river.

"You are right to be afraid," I said. "You have a debt to pay for all the souls you have tortured. Murdered. The lights you have extinguished forever."

I could not stop myself. My thoughts compressed, tightening in their fury. The insect wheezed, the pitiful throaty wails of an alien physiology. They were no less desperate than the sounds of human strangulation.

I struck its awareness. *I know what you have done*.

Torrents of pain bled from the creature's mind. In response, I gave no pity. No mercy. I opened the floodgates of prescience. Scenes from my visions rushed through its flailing consciousness. The emperor recoiled at my knowledge and power. Its executioner was at hand.

"Ambra," Waythrel whispered beside me, but the Xix was a butterfly swatted away by the hurricane of my vengeance.

"See them scream? See the billions boil and burn? I have seen them. Day after day, night after night, I have watched them. I know you decreed their deaths."

Tighter, I wrung the tortured creature. It could no longer stand on its own strength and finally sagged.

"You gave the victims in your dungeons no rest. Up with you!"

I invaded its mind further, overpowering the natural biology. I diverted energy from vital life processes and strengthened the signal to the legs. The surge forced the creature upright. Its eyes thrashed for help or escape. I dragged them toward me. I ravaged its thoughts with my image, my anger, and its imminent demise.

"Ambra, you must stop!" Waythrel cried.

I heard nothing, my soul colder than death, burning like the core of a star.

"Drown in the helplessness of your victims. Die with the murdered. Suffer the pains of the tortured. Their histories strangle you."

I opened the final valve of vision. I guided the terrible currents in my mind to the Dram emperor. Images battered the captive consciousness. Glimpses of other lives, other worlds, other dreams, and hopes terminated. The insect spasmed, the legs buckled despite my tyrannical commands, the creature's body at the breaking point.

"Ambra, don't become a monster!" a voice pleaded with me. "Release it! Don't let your own power consume you!"

I inhaled a breath of time. Only my awareness existed. In the moment, a part of me heard the plea. A portion recoiled at the mad she-god evolving within me, stunned at her murderous storm of retribution.

I retreated from the edge of my own damnation. How or why is for others to consider. I woke from a nightmare, shook off the crazed mood, and freed the emperor. It fell unconscious to the floor. Alive, yet forever wounded. Always to remember and experience the suffering it had created.

Waythrel grabbed my shoulders with its spidery arms. "Down to the flight deck. A ship has docked."

We raced through the ornate hallways, the surviving Xixian

team loping like hyper ballet-dancing spiders. Along the way, they incapacitated the stray soldiers that got in our way. We reached the airlock, entered the chamber, and transferred to the connected craft.

Within seconds, ours and the remaining Resistance ships not blown out of the sky converged on the Orb. Crew members screamed. An armada of Dram warboats focused on our position. They would achieve firing solutions in minutes.

"Ambra, please, get us out of here."

I leaned on my alien friend, not sure I was sane. From what I had seen and done, to what I would see and do, reality and vision again intermingled. Blurred together. Time—it was churning through past, present, and future. It was hard to understand which way was forward.

"No problem, Waythrel. Got an express ticket." My smile was weak.

"To where?" it asked.

"Home, and nowhere." I shook my head. "You can never go back, they say." I fixed my awareness on the destination and flexed my thought to activate the Orb.

And it opened. It filled my mind with radiance, flooding other's eyes with a different light. We dashed through a million dimensions of nothing and everywhere. We left far behind the scarlet horrors of Dram, painting the windows of our ship with the golden rays of Sol.

Chapter 32

Nothing we can do outrages Nature directly. Our acts of destruction give her new vigour and feed her energy, but none of our wreckings can weaken her power.

Marquis de Sade

My mind darted back in time, deep into the recesses of the past.

For billions of years, a cratered, irregular rock had waited for its day. It circled, cold and silent, an inert outcast, exiled from warmer spheres huddled around a yellow-white star. The largest of millions of brethren, yet a planetary failure. Orbits repeating, the stars whirled across its rocky horizon, but it did not lose patience. It did not count the eons. Without promise, devoid of thought, it held pregnant within its core a fate unguessed.

In the wink of an eye to this ancient entity, moving at the frenetic pace of life, hundreds of metallic gnats buzzed beside it. Each delivered a microscopic nudge. Every weak push augmented the others until the swarm built to a crescendo. The rock aban-

doned its aged, dogmatic course. It latched on to the energies of an Orb's tendril. Guided by malice, hyperspace flung the mass toward another star system. The hurtling behemoth erupted from transit, accompanied by the drove of demons blackening its outline. Inward to the bright golden light it rushed, gathering frightening speed, aimed like an arrow with terrible purpose.

Gravity. *Only force*. Manipulations of attraction by mysterious powers. A charged flight flung to a final fate.

A breeze blew through a woman's hair as a cloudless blue welcomed a new spring day. She watched children scamper across a concrete playground in London. Other mothers sat nearby or walked, shepherding their young. All familiar to her, many known well. She squinted into the sharp sunlight. The form of her three-year-old stumbled forward and pointed to the heavens.

"Look, Mummy! There's a star up in the sky."

She followed her daughter's finger to the crystalline heavens. A bright speck, as if it really were a small star, shimmered in the west.

"Yes, darling, it must be a falling star. I've never seen one in the daytime before." She grinned as the toddler bounced on her stubby legs.

"Mummy, mummy, I'll make a wish! I'll make a wish!"

"Make it a good one."

The girl squeezed her eyes shut, frowning in concentration. With a squeal, she opened them again and hopped into the air. "Mummy, I can't tell you. It's a *secret*, or it won't come true."

The young mother glanced into the sky once again. Her smile froze, fading as several wrinkles cut into her forehead.

"Look at it. It's so bright."

High in the atmosphere of Earth, where each day, thirty tons of material the size of sand grains burned, something horribly

larger combusted. One thousand miles from London, a deep shadow darkened the capital of Iceland. Vendors on the street turned their gazes upward. Suits in office buildings gawked out their windows.

Frantic calls on military and national security lines screamed in urgency at the unexpected calamity unfurling. An invader blotted out the sun, yet it blazed as a second star. The projectile erupted into a brilliance so terrible it blinded the fragile creatures below.

The atmosphere exploded over Canada. Trillions of megatons of TNT converted into diverse forms of energy. The igniting fireball seared the planet. Two hundred times the sun's intensity, it set fire to everything within its expanding radius.

As the surface absorbed the profound impact, the planet's thin outer layer peeled off in a growing wave like the skin pared from an apple. The collision slung the material into orbit. On this soaring sheet were the world's oceans, its land masses, each town, city, and state. Every living form in the biosphere.

Underneath the concussion simmered an ocean of magma. For all of human history, it lay hidden from view by the cooled crust but for rare volcanic eruptions. The asteroid shattered such fragile protection. Enormous volumes of liquid stone poured over the Earth and into its skies. The growing lake of fire spread like a yawning maw across the planet.

A hypersonic pressure wave of compressed atmosphere rushed ahead of it. Winds blowing at over eight thousand miles per hour annihilated all in their path. What remained was set aflame by the fireball that followed. Magnitude fourteen earthquakes threw down anything else that somehow persisted upright.

Hours later, the playground in London peered down at the ravaged surface. Chunks of the orbiting crust plunged back to Earth as fiery meteors. They inflicted further destruction on the dying world. No reaction, no technology, no preparation of the small creatures dotting the planet could protect them. The titanic

collision vaporized those within several thousand miles of the impact. The firestorms, heated winds, and extended shrouding of sunlight killed the rest. Ten billion souls cried out into the void.

In a day, an inferno raged across the globe. The oceans boiled to nothing. Vegetation transformed to ash. Every sign of life was wiped clean from the molten landscape. The once blue and white marble in the solar system turned obsidian, lifeless, and still. The third planet from the star was now sterilized.

The emperor's will had been done.

Chapter 33

The choice before human beings, is not, as a rule, between good and evil but between two evils.

George Orwell

From the infinite maze of light, the starship plunged into space. A glowing Orb behind us flared for several moments. The sphere went dark as if a switch was thrown.

A star radiated near the center of mass of a small system of gaseous and rocky worlds with a ring of asteroids. Its disk illuminated the third planet from the sun. The aliens at the controls on the bridge exchanged rapid conversation. I could sense them three floors up.

Waythrel rushed down the corridors to my room. It signaled outside the door, and I pressed a panel to allow entrance. The door slid open. A frazzled Xix burst inside—if you can fairly describe so disturbing an alien life-form with such a human adjective. My special sight painted the picture for me. I turned toward

it from my overlarge chair and waited to hear what I already knew.

"Ambra." It wasn't a sentence, just my name, but the tones spilled a story. "We have come to the coordinates of Earth."

The weight of the unspoken strained the air. I said nothing. My emotions were both drained and repressed. I had cried inside one thousand times for the future that had become my present. I had shared the tragedy with no one.

"There is something wrong. We need you on the bridge."

Nodding, I stood, feeling no weakness or fatigue in my limbs. Only a terrible stillness deep within.

I followed the alien through the ship and to the helm. The pilots and crew were silent, frozen before their instruments. I wore a black robe from the clothes provided to me. Xixian crafted, oversized, and dangling across my small form, it lay draped like an odd funeral garment. The strange material could not have been fashioned by humans. It drank the light to reflect it in hints of iridescence in the midst of darkness. On my head was Ricky's Red Sox hat. Ricky, murdered in another age of my mind, cremated a few hours ago.

"Ambra, the coordinates are correct," said Waythrel. "There is a rocky satellite of a mass and distance as specified. The planet must be Earth. But..."

Tears streamed down my face as I spoke, the words unlocking something deep within me. "It burns, my alien friends. It melts and smolders. My homeworld. Where my roots would have found warm soil again to end this withering of my soul. Spirits like dust are riding on the solar wind, blowing over our ship's shields. I *hear* their voices, billions of them crying out. I've heard them again and again. Can you feel the breath of their *souls*?"

I walked to the viewscreen and stared at the blackened sphere. Rivers of magma flowed like blood from mortal wounds. The crimson crisscrossed the surface, forming a bloodshot sclera. Scar-

ring the Northern Hemisphere, an enormous pool of lava. Altogether, the eye of Satan, boiling.

"The Dram are gone. Their work is finished."

"Why?" Waythrel whispered.

A terrible shudder ran through it and the crew. Alien, all of them, and yet they twisted inside with grief and affection. If any creatures carried the torch of divine love in our galaxy, it was the Xix.

I looked across the control room.

"They have my eggs and human captives for sperm. They believe their scientists can recreate me. At least something similar enough to serve their needs. But they desire a monopoly on my talent."

It was all so logical, so cold and calculated.

"The gene pool of Earth was waiting to produce more Ambra Dawns. Who knows what else of Reader power. It was a threat to their Hegemony. They removed the threat. And so my home was erased."

"Ambra, I don't have words for you," said Waythrel. The alien's eyestalks bounced and fell toward me. "You knew this would happen?"

"Since my arrival at Dram."

A stunned silence reverberated. "Ambra, why? Why didn't you tell us? We could have stopped it!"

"No, Waythrel!" I cried out, my hands in front of me, trying to block an attack. My tears surged, and I choked, my phrases garbled and pitched. "I've seen all the threads. The possible futures. They aren't endless! Not in the short term. One way out of the Dram homeworld. One! One for me to survive and prevent the slaughter of trillions."

I gaped at my blackened home, where my bare feet would never touch grass again, where evil had slaughtered hordes of humanity. I steadied myself on the wall.

"I walked the most painful path. I sacrificed an entire planet brimming with life for one deformed and blind citizen. Because others had foreseen hope for the galaxy. A faith in me."

Waythrel and the other Xix remained as statues. I could feel their churning emotions. I turned to my advocate, placing my trembling hand on the rough membrane of the alien's arm.

"I allowed my world to die to save the rest. Now, and for the years to come." Wiping tears from my eyes, I growled at all these monstrous forms. "Don't let the sacrifice be in vain."

I bolted away, my form the most monstrous of all, the greatest mass murderer of all time fleeing in her black robes like Death into the bowels of hell.

Chapter 34

The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao;
The name that is spoken is not the unchanging name.
That without name is the beginning of heaven and earth.

We landed on the moon three hours later.

The Resistance had built a base decades before on the dark side. In secret, they tunneled into the lunar rock several miles to shield it from enemy scans. It was, of course, one of many such concealed bases throughout the inhabited worlds.

But the proximity to Earth, the Earth that was, had a special significance. The planet had been the source of all Readers of importance, and the greatest supply for the galactic fleets. Now only the Dram in their human stockyards would breed more of us. Born into slavery, programmed to do their bidding, locking down their monopoly of beasts of burden.

We passed over the barren lunar landscape. The surface was littered with impact craters, the ancient evidence of celestial violence

never erased. Without wind, rain, or tectonic plate movements, the moon had defined death. No longer. Its gravitational keeper presented a far more illustrative lesson in mortality. Now life stirred only on the moon, as Earth smoldered a quarter-million miles away.

The Xixian ship descended into one of the larger depressions. A channel appeared in the rock. We entered a tunnel, diving straight toward the heart of the satellite. Illumination from above failed. The ship's navigation beams painted the sharp edges of the drilled stone.

A faint glow rose underneath us. It swelled in intensity until it blinded after the relative darkness of the shaft. The passageway opened to a broad chamber with many spacecraft. We taxied to a free area, and the vessel came to a stop on a landing pad hewn out of the lunar crust.

A small group was there to greet us, both Xix and humans somber, the members of my species pale and burdened. A young man with a blond beard led them forward and stopped before our entourage.

"We received your transmission. Your codes match those smuggled to us," he said. His eyes darted towards me. "*She* is with you?"

Waythrel gestured in my direction. "Michael, let me introduce to you Ambra Dawn. She brought us through the Orbs and defeated the Dram emperor herself. She is our great hope."

He squinted at me. "Hope," he muttered. "There isn't much of that left. Just darkness after yesterday." He glanced at me again, looking over the dark and loose-fitting robes, baseball hat, and absurd skull. "We'll take her to Richard. He continues to guide us. He'll decide what value this girl may have now."

"Then he still lives?" Waythrel asked.

He bristled, a fire in his eyes penetrating his attempts to suppress his anger. "Yes, although the medics can't say for how

long. The cursed Dram poisons degrade his tissues, but he has lost none of his powers!"

The alien lilted. "Of course, Michael, we expected nothing less. Please forgive me if my question seemed insensitive. You know we of Xix are doing all we can to preserve his life."

The man lowered his gaze. "And we are thankful. You know as well as I that his visions have made the Resistance possible." He grimaced in my direction, speaking to the rest of his companions, but his eyes riveted to my face. "See that they have housing. Attend to their needs. Afterward," he added, nodding to Waythrel, "we may arrange a meeting between these two Readers. Richard has waited long for this day."

He turned and marched out of the docking chamber, leaving us alone with the remainder of our hosts. I could still feel his gaze burning into me.

He seems a bit obsessed, I messaged my extraterrestrial companion. Maybe the Xix understood the dynamic better than I.

A complicated politics, Ambra. Michael is loyal and attached to his leader, who lies dying after his torture at the hands of the Dram. You come here with the rumor of greatness, beyond even Richard's powers. Michael resents this, and you will need to step softly in the beginning. Don't worry for now, there is much to learn. With your abilities, I have no doubt you will know all there is to know soon.

We exited the docking chamber and entered an elevator that sped us deeper into the moon to the last stage of my journey.

Part III

First the Cosmos, then the gods.
So, who can say from where the creation arose?
Perhaps, it created itself.
Perhaps, it did not.
The Being, the first Origin of Creation
Who looks down on it:
Only He knows.
Or perhaps, He does not.

Rig Veda, Creation Hymn

Chapter 35

Two possibilities exist: Either we are alone in the Universe or we are not. Both are equally terrifying.

Arthur C. Clarke

Strangers ushered us to quarters within the hidden moon settlement. They were unknown to me, respectfully distant, yet their humanness was overwhelming. I'd spent so much time surrounded by the alien. Disturbing odors, movements, textures—my senses had churned in confusion until exposure had numbed them.

But the sensations on this base! Sounds, pheromones, body warmth, skin pressed inward on a handshake. Millions of years of evolution primed my biology to respond. It was lightning through my nervous and hormonal system. Tears dripped over my cheeks as they shuttled us forward.

Waythrel and I insisted they house us together. Important events were cascading around the galaxy. Our escape from Dram had punched a hole in the cruel order of their empire. News was

scarce, but it trickled and would likely become a flood. We both wished to have the time to discuss matters when needed.

They were happy to accommodate our request. It was unsettling and healing to be in chambers designed by humans once again, whatever help the aliens had given. We outnumbered the Xix twenty to one, a ratio found only in a Resistance base so close to Earth. The personality of a culture imprints its architecture. This small flavor of humanity comforted me, further reorienting my sense of reality.

The design of the lunar post was inclusive of many species. The builders had also made concessions for the extraterrestrials in residence. Waythrel spent half an hour in an ultrasound Xixian chamber in the room. It was a device that bombarded the occupant with high-frequency sound waves. They find this soothing in a way we can't understand or experience. I took the human equivalent—a long, hot shower. Steam and temperature to burn away all the horror of my life. Of course, I stepped out merely numbed.

And tired. Fatigue tugged downward on my limbs. One leaden snowflake after the other, dropping, fusing, assembling an invisible garment with the weight of a world.

Wait. What was this? *A couch*. An actual couch. I couldn't look away.

I had not seen anything like one for what felt like a lifetime. Not since home. The warehouse? Maybe for the staff in offices the children never visited. I don't know. After the Sortax, it was alien-built or nothing. The norm involved odd geometrical efforts our captors calculated could hold our forms without damage. *Comfort* never entered their equations. The Xix? Well, the poor things tried. They could heal our bodies—fix broken biological machines they had studied. But psychology was another task altogether.

The worst weren't the abstract formulations of uncaring abominations. What hurt most, what made all of us ache for home, were the near-misses. And so my beloved aliens sinned.

Designs copied from their intense study of our species. Mimicking our aesthetics, so intellectually designed. And because of minor and pervasive glitches, all the more hideous. A torturous doppelgänger. A mockery of construction so like to our needs that wounded instead.

But here was a *couch*. A bona fide Earth sofa. I sat on its velvet cushions. The style, the design, the specifics, it didn't matter. It was *of us*. I could see it with my mind's eye. I could feel it over my skin. Its fabrics. Its shape. It's very human flaws. Again, I fought off tears. All for a damn piece of furniture.

I lay back until the upholstery enveloped me. My exhaustion, my raw infatuation with the domestic, they drugged my mind. I laughed. I cried. Cursed. Screamed. A Gatling gun fired emotions across the room while my core sank in ecstasy to the bottomless embrace of the soft pillows. Forever. I would never leave this glorious place.

"Ambra?"

A door clattered open, strange vibrations warping the air in the room. My altered state shattered, and I sprawled there, bone-tired on the furniture. Waythrel poked its eyestalks out of the sonic chamber.

"Is everything okay?" the alien continued.

Is everything okay? I understood its concern. I'd just whooped up the room like a pack of monkeys. But the wording hissed in my emotional soup. It felt vindictive. *Of course, things were not okay!* My planet was lava and ash! Earthrise perverted from a glowing marble of life to death's fiery eye. Billions slaughtered in horror and the remainder camping out on *the moon*.

Guilt howled for my attention, could not be long ignored. It hunted me like a rabid wolf. I sprinted from corner to corner of my mind to evade. More than anything, this chase drained the energy from my limbs.

"I'm resting, Waythrel."

The alien was silent. I couldn't help but sense its skepticism.

"You need to sleep, Ambra. You are at the breaking point. What you have done in the last forty-eight hours is beyond the powers of any living creature in the galaxy. You have sacrificed and suffered. Your brain is overtaxed. Go rest. Rebuild your awareness as is the way of your species."

The Xix was correct, of course. The problem with floundering in a degraded state is that you are less able to recognize and follow good advice. Had it not been for my telepathic sight, I would have rebelled, thrown a fit, not at Waythrel, but at the universe itself. *How dare it allow such hideousness?* I hated the cosmos. I hated its detached and sadistic indifference. And, without doubt, I hated myself most of all.

Instead, the alien's thoughts bled through the room and into my mind. Not human, so bent and coiled, a mass incomprehensible in complexity. But infused with a color I recognized. A sweet smell blossoming from purity. Affection. Worry. A mother's touch. The monstrosity pulled me once again from the brink.

"You're right. I'll go to bed."

My body had gained thousands of pounds, despite the reduced lunar gravity. I pushed against the oppression of the laws of nature, defying creation, spitting in its face. I wobbled to my feet, placing one trembling leg in front of the other until I crossed the common room and entered my bedroom.

I face-planted into the pillows. I didn't switch off the lights, unfurl the blankets, or tuck myself in. I plunged straight over the edge of consciousness into the numb, empty, timeless unbeing of the void.

Chapter 36

The flower which is single need not envy the thorns that are numerous.

Rabindranath Tagore

I didn't wake as a new person (ha! too much is broken ever to be fixed), but I opened unseeing eyes several steps removed from the pit of madness.

I stumbled hungover into the common room. Waythrel had laid out on the table a breakfast delivered to our door. The smells of Earth drugged me again. I sat down to steady myself, shaking my head with a grin at the alien.

"It is to your liking?" it asked.

"It's heavenly." Of course, the creature had arranged things all wrong on the plates and with the utensils. A place setting and service of a very committed and loving five-year-old.

It *was* heavenly.

I chewed each bite at a glacial pace. I was going to experience

every flavor, texture, smell, and weight of the porridge, eggs, bread, and juice. I shoved into a dark box any thoughts about how long we would have such priceless commodities, how much time until we relied on synthetic collections of nutrient goop to replace the melted cornfields of Nebraska. Right now, I could pretend I was back home, in my parents' kitchen, the beautiful planet underneath.

Not even the funky bouncing alien distracted me.

I had hardly finished dressing when a messenger outside our door pinged. He asked me to join him to meet with Michael. They would take me to their great Reader. Waythrel insisted on accompanying us. The aide was firm. The initial meeting would be private, with me alone. The Xix consented.

With that understood, we marched through the rocky tunnels of the moon base. After an extended trek, our guides brought us to an epic elevator bank in a massive shaft, ten sets of doors circling us. We entered the lifts and descended several more levels to a large medical ward.

Michael was waiting. I needed to study him. His biases were a gate locking Richard from me, and I couldn't let him interfere with the contact I had long anticipated. My first encounter with him had been too soon after the shock of encountering the extinct Earth of my nightmares. My mind had been in shambles. My emotions, spent. My focus, gone. I had regained much of my balance at this point.

I refrained from invading his thoughts. I wanted to respect the dignity of others whenever possible. So I simply Read the recent past to form images. He was of average height with a stocky build. Ideal for rotational roles on some football team at a Midwest

college. A crispness shone in his blue eyes. He kept his beard and hair short and trimmed. The face suggested discipline, perhaps scholarship. He radiated command and decisiveness.

At his side was a white-coated woman, Asian features, long midnight strands tied in a bun. She struck me as an attending physician. The setting, the attendants, the gravity—Richard was a dying man.

"Waythrel will need to wait outside," Michael began. "He insisted on meeting Ambra alone this first time. He wishes to commune with her as a Reader. Human to human."

"I understand," answered the alien, although its translator conveyed an annoyed tone.

The doctor interrupted. "I'm Emily Chan," she said, "the ranking Earthling in the medical ward. I've overseen the care of Mr. Cross. We apologize for this inconvenience. We are thankful for the aid the Xix have given in all our efforts." She nodded to the alien. "They have transformed our quality of healthcare, even if we have come to take that for granted."

Michael scowled at her but motioned for me to follow. I walked behind them, down to the end of the hallway. We halted in front of a set of double automatic doors.

He turned to me, his voice grave. "In that room, you will meet the most powerful Reader in the Resistance. He has guided our strategies, risked his life, his health, his very sanity to serve our cause. Don't underestimate his vision."

Dr. Chan twitched at my side. "Stop antagonizing her, please. This is *Ambra Dawn*. She unlocked an *Orb*, faced down the Dram. The Xix have brought her here. She has the power to surpass anything anyone has done, if she hasn't already. We *need* her."

Michael set his jaw, his face muscles striated. "Whatever rumors you have heard of this girl, until she has served the Resis-

tance as he has served, she is nothing more than another lost Reader who has been found."

"So, why is she here? Why has Richard desired to see her?"

"The council believed in her potential."

"Which means you don't, I suppose."

"What I believe is not of consequence."

This back-and-forth about which freak would win in a throwdown reminded me too much of what was juvenile in our species. Arguing about our heroes, superheroes, our gods. As if we all didn't cry and fart and die and rot. All I could think about was that, behind those doors, was someone who could understand me. Richard had enough of my experiences to have some clue about what life was like inside my head. In this indifferent universe, he gave me hope that I wasn't alone.

My frustrations boiled over. "We don't have time for this! I've come a long and horrible way under knife and death and madness. The Earth is charcoal. I'm not going to listen to your bickering. He's asked to see me, and I *will* see him before he passes." I raised my hand as Michael protested. "Yes, he will pass. And it will be soon. I can see it even in the distortions of spacetime he causes. Just like I can feel your anger at this future you can't accept."

"I don't care who you are!" he shouted. "I won't have you speak like this!"

He took a step toward me, but before he could follow through, I sent a hard thought into his mind. Not enough to hurt him, but to stun and dislodge his wrath. Dignity would have to wait.

I will meet with your Richard. I have hoped to see him for some time. I will not allow you to stop me. I have too much I need to learn and share with him.

He stepped backward, his arms swimming and his eyes wide.

"Michael, what is it? Are you okay?" Dr. Chan asked. She squinted at the paleness spreading over his face.

"I'm fine, Emily," he whispered. "Just...just let her through."

Both moved aside, creating a space between me and the entrance. I steadied myself and walked forward. The sensors detected my presence and set the machinery in motion.

The doors opened.

Chapter 37

While God waits for his temple to be built of love, men bring stones.

Rabindranath Tagore

I waded into darkness. Lights were off. Wan, glimmering strips outlined a countertop across from me, the sole break in the black. A rat's nest of instrumentation surrounded a hospital bed between me and the glowing counter. The technology was a hodgepodge of human and alien devices. Extensions and probes from churning machines converged on a prone figure —*Richard.*

For my senses, the gloom didn't matter. I could see the full extent of the horror in my mind's eye. His caretakers had split him open along his back. They had plugged the hoses and cables into his spinal column. An odd, transparent material, likely of Xixian manufacture, coated everything, sealing his dissected flesh from exposure. Likewise, tubes and wires entered into his skull. Images of worms boring into fruit latched onto my

thoughts. His lungs hissed to a metronome, aided by machinery as well.

Pity stole my breath. Here was another who had paid a terrible price for his talents and choices. Out of respect for this cost, I withheld any probing of his mind. I slid along the equipment to a chair at the front of the bed. As I approached, I turned my focus to his features. A Black man, tall and thin, perhaps once of athletic shape now shriveled to skeletal form. His eyes were closed. Still, I did not probe to see if he had conscious thoughts. I sat and waited.

After a few moments, his eyes fluttered open, and he spoke. His words were slow and slurred, husky and rasped. The pain from speaking radiated and battered my awareness.

"I knew you were here. Before you landed on this. Barren rock. It's amazing. You distort the very space you move within."

I held back tears. "So they tell me."

His voice strengthened to a whisper. "I apologize. I can give you no better welcome. I can't look you in the eye. But what need? You see so much. Not with your eyes, correct?"

"You're right. I'm blind."

"Yet not sightless," he continued, and a short coughing fit took him. "Ah, my atmosphere is pain. The Xix have been so helpful. It looks horrific. All this. It keeps my mind more free from the neural poisons. Maintaining my life functions. Without this," he gestured with his eyebrows and a slight motion of his head, "dementia and death months ago."

"The Dram have no mercy."

"You know too well. You have seen it, I suppose. My capture. My torment. Rescue from their dungeons."

"Yes," I said, tears pushing through my efforts. "In dreams over the years, and in recent visions. The Xix were never suspected in your escape, although a lot were killed."

"Our most terrible burden, Ambra. That so many would die. That we might live."

I could say nothing. My agony choked me.

"I did not see it coming. This greatest of calamities. I have waited to speak to you for so long. Fate kept us separated. I had so much to tell you. Inform you. Of this universe, Earth occupied. Our plans to set it free. Now, after this? I don't know what to say. I have no words of wisdom. Only a question. Why couldn't I see it?"

He coughed again and motioned to his throat, indicating he could no longer talk. His face was a mask of pain and defeat.

It won't keep us apart, Richard.

His eyes widened, closed, tears falling. I allowed myself to fully enter his mind.

This is more than I could have imagined, his thoughts relayed. *You have grown powerful beyond the dreams of the Dram.*

My power is limited, as you can see. Earth is ashes, despite all I could do.

Why, Ambra? You had foreseen it. Why didn't you stop it?

I can't explain. But I can show you. Do you have the strength?

I don't know. But I would rather die knowing. Experience even a small piece of your vision rather than live a few more hours in ignorance.

So be it. I focused my thoughts, stripping away the unnecessary. He had to know the path through the maze of destruction, so he could understand. Whether he could accept humanity's sacrifice for the rest of the galaxy, I'd find out.

I reached, gentleness my guide. I joined our minds, releasing the flow of visions. The flood strained his physiology. Machines blinked and beeped in consternation as his vital signs approached dangerous levels. His body shook, trembling as the shock roiled through him.

I withdrew from his mind to give him time to recover. I kept a tendril of contact to alert me when he was voicing his thoughts.

I am so sorry, Ambra. Fate chained you to an impossible burden.

So much you have had to endure and carry. So alone. At least I can tell you, I know more than anyone the toxins you have swallowed.

Tears rained. I stretched out with my hand and stroked his head. "And I know yours, Richard. I see, I *feel through you,* your broken body. I relive it in communing with your mind." I turned to telepathy. *I wish we had more time. Time I see and swim and sicken in. But I can't control it. I hate to be so alone again.*

Yes, it ends for me. Even my visions are fading, which means the poison has reached my central neurons. I am fortunate the Xixian treatments have slowed the progress so much. The rest of me rots. My organs will fail before I go completely mad. But all grows dim, even dark at times. And yet, I believe I still can see something you can't.

Tell me.

I can't see your form, because you twist all spacetime around you. I can see the outlines. You're a glacier crushing everything in your path, carving out a new landscape. Your shape is made and unmade, again and again, never certain, never identical.

A long pause. The glow in his consciousness waned, and in the dimness I could Read no activity. I waited for the light to return.

But now I understand why I did not see Earth's destruction. In my mind, Earth still exists in our future, even though it does not now. It is there! How can this be?

His thoughts faded as the machines began complaining again. This conversation had pushed his body to the breaking point.

Richard? Please. Are you there?

I reached deep into the recesses of his blurring perception. His consciousness was submerged, trapped at sea, bobbing above and below. Ideas breached the waters in brief moments. His awareness took wild breaths before plunging down into near oblivion.

Fading...Ambra...You are turbulence in the path...Blinded me...

Dr. Chan came sprinting into the room, followed by Michael. She glanced at the monitors and called a code to other nurses. I

shut out their efforts and focused. Time was short. Only his dying thoughts mattered.

Events are fluid...like the ocean...tumult...can't see into it...but I can see—after. A miracle. So much light...the voices of heaven singing...

Was he still sane? Were these true visions or hallucinations of his decaying mind?

Fingers of Divinity...through you they will speak...you only need to touch it, and the course of everything is new.

A team of alien and human medics gathered around him now.

Waythrel rushed to me. "Ambra! You must stop! The strain is too high! He's dying!"

Don't listen to them...better I die now. Why live empty and for suffering? Goodbye, Reader. It has been my privilege to know you...so much light...

His cognitive focus collapsed, submerged in a more primitive boiling of mental functions, and it wasn't clear if he had lost all awareness.

I glanced at the Xix. "It is his wish to share with me as he dies."

Michael glared at me in horror, pain etched in his face.

"I'm sorry," was all I could offer him.

Ambra.... The thoughts echoed from a vast distance, deep within the cave of his consciousness. *Ambra, hear me. Change the course...they will help you...you...must...change...its course.*

His mind went dark, the machinery ominous in silence. The frantic activity stalled, and for a moment, everything was as still as space.

"He's dead," said Dr. Chan. "There's nothing we can do."

Michael wept, kneeling beside his leader, burying his head next to his fallen friend. I also felt a palpable sadness in the Xixian minds. They mourned the passing of a noble comrade and a powerful force in their fight against the Dram.

Even so, I noticed their faith reorient. They turned toward me.

Unknown, untested, I was to assume Richard's role. The hopes of entire species, and the remains of a massacred race, all were set on Ambra Dawn. Like the weight of a star.

Even so, that burden was secondary to my struggles as I stared off into space. I had lost the one person who could understand me. Richard was a man I could relate to as a Reader and as a human being. He had left his last thoughts with me. Urgent concepts conveying a truth he had seen that I could not. Something about me he had strained to show as his mind collapsed.

And I had no idea what he was trying to tell me.

Chapter 38

I don't think of all the misery, but of the beauty that remains.

Anne Frank

I nursed my queasy stomach in the guest room with Waythrel. The low lunar gravity infected me with daily nausea with little to counter the effects. The base had been constructed in great secrecy, while Dram agents herded our clueless kind on nearby Earth. There had been no time for sophisticated design. No time for gravitational enhancements or a crude rotating mechanism to increase average g-forces.

I'd refused lunch. I was sick from the environment. Sick from seeing Richard Cross die over and over again in my mind. Sick from watching our planet perish one hundred times in my visions. And I was sick of a prolonged and empty conversation with Waythrel about a dying man's thoughts.

"I am sorry, Ambra," it spoke after a long silence. "For all we know, those words were spoken in a decaying brain state and could have no meaning. He might have been speaking nonsense."

"I don't believe it," I whispered. "He was fighting to maintain focus, to communicate something he discovered. If so, it's important, and I need to find the answer. If it's nonsense, then it doesn't matter."

"Except it will drain your energies from other tasks."

I strangled the scream trying to rip out of me. "What other tasks, Waythrel? I may have found the strength to do what I did, but I'm wounded. As deep as you can imagine. Everything I am is bleeding!"

"Ambra."

"Would you feel any different? If they had destroyed Xix? How can any creature thrive without their homeworld? We're limbs cut off from the tree. We're going to wither and die!"

"Ambra! You cannot! Or else this sacrifice will be in vain. You are now our single prospect for defeating the Dram. You must find strength in this role."

I sighed, a long release until my diaphragm trembled. "I'll try. And that's why I have to discover the meaning of Richard's last words. I sensed a soaring hope in them. An optimism specific for my kind. I wish he could have told me more. But his faith is what keeps me going now."

"Then may it not be a false dream."

"I can't talk about Richard anymore, Waythrel. I am too wrecked. No more riddles without answers. Something else." My mind turned to this new role I was expected to play. "What happened on Dram? Do the other worlds know about Earth?"

"Our enemies have reverted to full militaristic mode. Their aggression has increased a thousand-fold. With cruelty, they are reminding everyone of how terrible they can be. They censor communication from Dram, but the Xix can elude their crude technology. Information flows. The emperor is in critical care. His mind unhinged by your actions. He babbles nonsense and cries out for protection from humans. The high inquisitor has

followed succession rights and assumed interim control of the empire. A new sovereign will be chosen—an archaic and barbaric ritual of the noble houses I will save for another time. The military has orders to exterminate even the hint of insurrection in the Hegemony. Many innocents are paying with their lives."

"Yes, I've seen it. So much pain. Even in hope of victory, seas of suffering."

"Word of Earth has spread throughout the galaxy. I am sad to say not exactly from concern for Earthlings, but far more for the implications. Firstly, reminders the Dram are more than willing to slaughter entire worlds, as if this could have been forgotten. Secondly, the greatest well of Readers to supply hyperspace travel is gone. My apologies to be so blunt about human worth in the Hegemony, but this is the hard truth. You have been a resource. A necessary commodity. A great fear is sweeping through the developed systems that this stock has been destroyed."

"It's okay, Waythrel. Every step of the way, I've been punished with this lesson. Nearly killed. Your words don't hurt me."

"Yes. I do not doubt it. All worlds see that the Dram control this supply, without which interstellar travel will cease. The empire tightens its grip over the galaxy with this slaughter."

The alien stood and engaged in the strange Xixian tap dance, pacing across the room.

"But one thing they did not suspect—that word of you and your actions would escape. We of Xix have ensured the spread. Accounts of one who has opened the Orbs now grow. The stories take a shape of their own. Reports resonate that this human also escaped the clutches of the emperor. Like a spark dropped in a parched land, a fire is kindled and spreads from world to world. I have never seen anything like it. In response, they strike without mercy to stop the blaze. But the fools find their responses testify to its veracity. With every boot stomping on the flames, they scatter

sparks and embers, igniting one thousand more hearts. They feed the inferno in their clumsy efforts to snuff it out."

Waythrel stopped pacing. "You are fast becoming legend."

I bowed my head. I didn't have the spirit to laugh at this new absurdity. "From slave-freak to myth in a blink of an eye. All I've done is stand aside to let monsters char my homeworld." My face tightened as screams slapped my soul. "Do you know in the quiet of the night, I hear them? Their cries of terror? Billions of them." I trembled as the voices rolled over my consciousness again. I fought them back and pushed the vision away.

"Legends seldom earn their status, even if you are a heroine in your own way."

"No."

"I will not argue with you over your sacrifice, or theirs." It gestured upward, indicating Earth. "What I mean to say is different. Independent of you. Myths serve a purpose for those who nurture them and spread them to willing ears. The galaxy needs hope, Ambra. The oppressed worlds are crushed under this brutal tyranny. Its creatures have lost the capacity to even dream of victory. Only something larger than themselves, that they can believe is greater than the Dram, can give it back to them. An army is not enough. A leader is too fragile. No, what they need is a god. Or in your case, a goddess."

My head fell on my arm as I groaned.

"Your feelings in this matter are irrelevant. Your legend grows because they need it."

"I have to find a way to live up to it."

"You have said it. So I must have faith that it will be."

We didn't speak anymore that night. I was exhausted. Waythrel might not require anything resembling sleep, but I had to rest. I prepared for bed, told my alien roommate goodnight, and collapsed on my mattress, unconscious in seconds.

Some goddess.

Chapter 39

We cannot define these things without obscuring them, while we speak of them with all assurance. Our doubts cannot take away all the clearness, nor our own natural lights chase away all the darkness.

Blaise Pascal

And the dream came.

I flew through the heavens, launched by my father's arms. A cold perversion of the distant stars tugged me. I panicked at the evil hidden among them. I sped forward in time. I sat at my family's kitchen table to see the demon man. I raced through the high corn and bled at the feet of his henchman. In the cruel evening, I stared along the green stalks to the sky. The grinning devil mocked me. His shadow darkened the moon.

But as the light faded and blackness closed, I did not wake in my bed screaming and soaked in sweat. Not this time.

Instead, I floated in a blank emptiness, without illumination, sound, or scent. Madness lurked in this sensationless null. It also

sharpened my awareness as I approached the abyss of sanity. I stretched into the nothingness for contact.

A disturbance.

So delicate, I couldn't tell which sense it engaged. Was it sight? A pale glow growing in front of me? Or touch? A cool breeze, a ripple of air like a whisper over my skin? Or did it stir faint dreams of childhood, of cold winters in the plains? The barest hint of a smell, a taste of wood smoke from a fire resonating with ancestral memories?

None of these. The experience blossomed. A million voices phase shifted from buzz to hum to tone. A celestial choir chanted a melody. It gestated in the drowning darkness. The music was more than sound. It contained the psyches of the singers. Psychology and intellect echoed in counterpoint from a cavern deep within each member.

The chorus painted the emptiness in a beautiful light, with colors recognized by my unique sense, a luminescence I could touch. As I reached for this glow, it ceased as a song that one might hear and became a water in which I swam. A clay I could sculpt.

And *I knew*. *I understood.* The voices laughed with joy. From all directions, their vitality converged on me. I had only to embrace them.

Then—*cold, hard, irregular.* Revolving in this directionless place, seeking, I experienced a new disturbance. A shape unerased before me. A net with infinite dimensions, light bent and surrounded it. Enveloped it and waited.

Everything was still, the energies potential, the taut string of a bow with the arrow notched.

All that remained was for me to release the shot.

Chapter 40

Give me a place to stand,
and I shall move the earth.

Archimedes of Syracuse

"I don't understand," Waythrel repeated.

We raced through the moon base to meet with alien physicists. I speed-walked, waving my arms, trying to convey my ideas. The alien easily kept pace, bouncing on its many legs. My words spilled with frustration.

"I don't have the knowledge, the understanding. I don't even know if you and the Xix do, so how can I hope to explain?"

We converged on the Xixian wing of the settlement. I bent over, my hands on my knees. My phrases burst between my breaths as staccato gunshots.

"I have intuition. Like Thel told me. Before I was blind, I didn't understand the physics of seeing. *I just saw*. I don't know

how this can be, or what it means, or how to say it. But I know I can do it. But I will need *help*."

We moved again. Waythrel was silent until we reached the doors to a makeshift laboratory. But here it raised one of its creepy, tendrilled hands.

"You will try to explain to our scientists. Of course, we don't have the best of them here, or even a reasonable representation of the areas you might require. A handful of technologists spared from other needed activities. We dispatched them to this site to work multiple functions, engineering the most relevant. I hope this will serve."

I had no idea what would serve. A Xix engineer made Einstein's brain look like a rat's. That had to count for something. And right now, it was all I had.

The doors opened, and we walked inside. Several aliens were waiting for us at Waythrel's request. I sensed curiosity, expectation, but I was unable to venture into the complexity of their thought.

"Go ahead, Ambra. It is your show."

Waythrel stepped to the side, abandoning me to the swinging forest of alien eyestalks. I set my shoulders, tilting my head to look them in the eyes. *Might as well just get to it.* They were the experts. *They* would have to figure out what I meant.

"Thel once told me spacetime is like a gel. An ever-changing fluid where events of past, present, and future depended on the shape of the stuff itself."

The ripples of crestfallen emotion from the extraterrestrials indicated that I'd screwed up. *Brain fart, Ambra Dawn.* Disappointment stained the surrounding psyches. Well, I couldn't help it that I had the intellect of an Earth ape. I *was* an Earth ape!

One of the scientists spoke. "A crude description, even in your simple language."

"Yes, okay," I said, not wanting to lose their trust in me.

"Humans can understand basic causality—events now creating future states. The gel is squeezed one way and reshaped in time dimensions."

They were silent, waiting, further demoralized at my conceptualization of it all. But I would not stop.

"So, why isn't it possible for what comes to reshape what was?"

The creatures engaged in discussion, their eyestalks off me and twirling around each other. Intense concentration radiated from Waythrel. The one that had spoken to me stepped forward. It was taller and broader than my friend, its coloration a greenish-blue with iridescent stripes. This contrasted with Waythrel's deep-purple spots.

"Your distinction between past, present, and future is misguided. It is difficult to communicate with you on this topic without distortion. Within these constraints, however, this of which you speak has long been considered possible. But untried."

"Why untried?" I asked.

"Because we have lacked a technical understanding of how to proceed. And because it has been presumed unwise to enter recursive space."

"Recursive space?"

"Again, we struggle with the limitations of language. Should you alter the events of history from later time points, you also modify those same coming occurrences, perhaps impacting even your actions to reach into what came prior. A circular chain of incidence, which, in a simplistic view, appears to lead to paradox."

"Like killing your mother before you were born, so you would never have been born to kill her."

"In general terms, yes. These are consequences within effects. They are reminiscent of procedures in a computer program calling on themselves, potentially looping infinitely in causality. Loops of this nature cannot be followed until they resolve."

"What does that mean?" I wondered out loud. I sensed a similar befuddlement in Waythrel. My Reader friend was no cosmologist.

"That the aftermath of such actions is unpredictable. Why do you ask us this?"

I looked at the scientist. I had to come clean, tell them my hopes. I knew I couldn't do it without them.

"Because I can save Earth."

"Save Earth," echoed my advocate, eyestalks abuzz. "By altering the past?"

"Yes."

"How, Ambra? You were listening. Even we of Xix cannot do this."

"I don't know how! I know enough of what I can do. I am hoping with your help I can succeed."

I skipped around, waving my arms at everything and nothing. I tried to explain the vision, to put into language what were insights deeper than any words I had.

"There's potential, enormous strength in the millions of clueless Readers of Earth. *Earth before*. Those who were, but who are no more. Power beyond anything you have imagined."

"I don't understand, Ambra," said Waythrel.

"They are also *Writers*. Blind, but with sleeping Writer ability. Some more, some less. I can shape spacetime, you know this. So can they, but they cannot direct it. Their brain cyst is too undeveloped. But I can channel them. I can refocus their energies!"

"To what end?"

"I can *Read* the past. I can *Write* in the present. You must see the next step."

One of the scientists answered, excitement radiating from its thoughts. "You believe you can alter the space and time of what has happened."

"Yes!" I blurted. The arm waving intensified. "But there are

problems. At least two I can see. I'm sure more I can't. First—it needs a huge amount of energy. More than I'll ever have. To reach backward in time and change things by myself—it's impossible. I can't do it. Not alone. That is why I need *them*."

"The Earth Readers of the past?"

"That's right! Together we have the strength. I can combine our energies, guide them, like a chorus singing. Tens of thousands. Millions. So much more powerful than one voice."

"What is the other obstacle you mentioned?" Waythrel asked.

"The second—I'll have to find a lens to focus these forces. Even if I can direct it, the power is still too weak, dispersed like a mist or fog. Something has to magnify it like the light of a star through a child's glass, a bright spot that sets a piece of paper on fire!"

"What kind of lens?" asked another of the scientists. "How do you redirect such energies?"

They were so smart but still couldn't see where I could. "You can't guess? What's the most powerful distorter of spacetime known in the galaxy?"

Understanding dawned as a hot wave through the alien group. The audacity of my ideas frightened and excited them.

Waythrel whispered. "The Orbs."

"Yes." I hopped. "And I know them and how to travel through them. And I see them in a way no one else has. We've thought of them as tunnels between different spatial points in the now. But they are...*more*. I've seen infinite doors inside them, opening one behind the other. Not just in space, but also in time."

One of the Xixian scientists stuttered through the translator. "But every Sphere leads to another, either indirectly on the Strings, or as you have shown, directly, when they are opened. How can you direct through time what is forced through the physical dimensions? How do they link through time?"

The next part I didn't understand myself. *And yet I saw*.

Maybe I didn't need to. These alien geniuses could figure it out. I'd just tell them what I knew.

"The Orbs don't connect to each other."

"Ambra," began Waythrel as I hesitated, "of course they do."

"No, it seems like it, but you can't *see*. Your instruments can't measure. They don't *connect*. I don't know how it can be, but I've seen it. All those magical balls, the Holy Orbs, they *don't exist separately*, not as you think. There aren't *many* of them. There's only *one*."

"One?" whispered Waythrel.

"Yes, one!" I gestured and pointed and tried to draw in the air things I couldn't even picture in my mind. "It's in all these places at the *same* time, an infinite door unlocking boundless regions, endless periods. Areas unreachable by the String Tree, touching worlds the tendrils don't contact. A door leading to locations so much farther than we can imagine, galaxies half a universe away."

Astonished thoughts passed through the group.

"More than distant spaces, but also *times.* Near and very far. The Orb here, opening the door in this space, will do as well as any to focus the energies of Readers past."

Their lead engineer turned all its eyes to me. "And where will you focus this power, Ambra Dawn?" Awe and fear spilled from its voice, its brain racing to places my own could not follow.

"The thing that slaughtered my people," I said. "Richard Cross asked me to change its course. So I will."

Chapter 41

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.

Kahlil Gibran

Months of research followed this conversation. The best of Xixian scientists traveled to the moon base and set up shop. They introduced me to the intellectual stars of their species, minds most Xix could not fathom.

It didn't matter to me. I was a simple rodent to these developed creatures. A rat with a singular ability and insight stimulating a cascade of creativity in their science. I gave them a "humanitarian" reason to pursue their ideas. A chance to save an entire planet and its dominant sentience. Of course, and with it all, the Reader potential held within.

They imported brains and equipment. Performed a succession of experiments. Piled secrecy on top of concealment. How they did this all under the nose of the Dram amazed me. For several

weeks, I spoke again and again to Xixian scientific delegations. They listened to my words and rained questions on me. Behind those scenes, they developed their theories for making this bold attempt succeed.

A lull followed the initial flood of activity. The days quieted, the interviews stopped, and the aliens left me alone. Squirreled away in some new corner of the moon base, they pursued the implications of my proposal.

Waythrel kept me updated as much as was possible. Successes and failures, hypotheses and dead ends. My favorite Xix simplified the ideas so I could understand at least a fairytale of what was happening. Explanations were complicated by the fact that my advocate also possessed a poor understanding of the matters. Your average Jane struggling with Einstein's writings and trying to convey them to a hamster.

Meanwhile, I fought off the terrible chill creeping over me.

Reading these pages, you are sitting somewhere on our bountiful planet, *before*. Legions of life surround you that you ignore, undervalue, and spend your minutes complaining about. Humans, other animals, insects, the microbes in your gut and on the surface of your body. The viruses infecting your cells, those of plants and bacteria. Minimalistic parasites that have driven so much of evolution.

The sum total of life on Earth, the biosphere, is, in your time, a tiny shell of air and sea and life, paper-thin, floating on a lake of magma. In some ways, you are a small cell in a fragile, giant organism. Each part is hopeless on its own. Every unit contributing and taking from the whole. A network of smaller pieces assembling into a powerful and complex system that changed the planet's composition.

But the ocean of magma will be set loose. From my vantage point in your future, it has poured over field and stream, peak and

valley, sea and city. Burning, torching them to ash. You can't feel what it's like when the great body of Earth has died, and you, a single, small cell, are cast into the vacuum. Cut off. *Withering*.

I withered. As did every human on the moon base. Day by week, week by month. We were dying some kind of death never cataloged. The atrophy from a murdered homeworld. Despite the distance from Xix, the aliens did not fall ill. Neither had I on Dram. Travel is different. A journey brings loss, separation, but a psychic link remains. An umbilical cord feeding sustenance to the soul, allowing the body to continue.

Now, Mother Earth was dead, devoid of connection. We ate food, yet we starved. We socialized but endured isolation. Earthlings suffered a progressive, inexorable decay of a branch cut from the tree. For us, it was getting terribly cold in space.

Expeditions ventured at times to the horror around which we revolved each month. Some to the surface, searching places where the fires had been less fierce, where perhaps some hint of life might remain. But nothing. Even near the deep-sea vents, where bacteria had thrived beside geothermal springs at temperatures close to boiling, they found only cooling lava.

And wasn't it pointless? What if some probe uncovered a super bacterial spore that ate rock and metabolized sulfurous gas? The biosphere could not be recreated. Not in a million years. One hundred times that would be too little. Mother Earth had required longer durations the first time. Four billion for life intelligent enough to think about itself to evolve.

The charred cinder masquerading as our homeworld might start over. Perhaps something evolving to consider the universe again in another five billion years. By this time, our sun would die, blow up to a red giant like the one in the Dram system, cooking the world beyond salvage. Cheering thoughts.

Once I joined the surveyors and traveled to Earth. We left the base on a Xixian spacecraft, circling from the dark side of the

moon. We witnessed Earthrise. Not the one from NASA photographs. Not the stirring images of a crescent blue-white marble hanging in darkness. Instead, an ash-shrouded ruin. Decorated with soot-smothered streams and lakes of lava. A monster's eye glared at us over the lunar horizon.

Within hours, the powerful ship put us in orbit about the calamity. We descended in smaller vessels to examine the terrain. Our home was unrecognizable. It was impossible to see detail through the clouds of smoke and cinder. Not to mention the constant plunge of debris still falling from space back to the surface. The journey was hazardous, and Waythrel had protested my traveling.

At different wavelengths, the Xixian instruments cut through the fumes. They revealed the ravaged landscape beneath. Without oceans, the continents were indistinct. No polar caps, and it became easy to lose orientation of north and south.

Nowhere stood a single reminder that we had existed. The expanse around the planet had been swept clean of our satellites and junk by the material hurled into orbit, much of it still waiting to bring more fire in its fall.

A few hours were enough, more than I could bear. Shaking with horror, we returned to the desolate surface of the moon. *Equally lifeless*. But Earth was more barren for what it had once been. For what had been lost and burned and buried in that cataclysm.

Afterward, sitting in my room, I struggled to purge my mind of those memories. But my efforts failed. Again and again, I pushed them aside until my thoughts lurched through my tumor and into the past. The horrific images served as my navigation. They dragged my awareness into the darker corners of history. I crash landed in Germany, 1940s. The slaughter of millions. Ashes sent into the skies.

The name they used years later, letters etched into the text-

books, seared itself into my memory. A two-part term, from the ancient Greek: *holos*, "whole" and *kaustos*, "burnt."

Completely burnt. The word haunted me.

Holocaust.

Chapter 42

All great truths begin as blasphemies.

George Bernard Shaw

In the meantime, the investigations continued.

We fought the terrible chill freezing our souls, the helplessness inviting madness. I turned again and again to the only hope available. The one small seed trying to germinate as the Xix searched their way through a maze of science and technology.

After a series of experiments performed without my input, they included me in the process. At first it was simple things. Reaching into the recent past to modify spacetime in incremental ways they could detect and quantify. Nothing related to the grand plan I'd put in motion. No manipulation of forces through the Orbs or the channeling of others to a common task. They wanted to gauge the range of my abilities. Understand how to measure them. Before they moved on to the dangerous and impossible, they needed to calibrate the merely possible.

The second phase was forming groups to enhance our capabil-

ity. Among the humans on the moon base, a high proportion were Readers. Once briefed, all leapt at the chance to work on the project. A few of the most powerful from Xix also participated. They boosted the chorus of power at our disposal. In these secondary experiments, they employed several hundred human and Xixian subjects.

At first, we found limited success. I could sense the energies of the participants, the fields their aggregate abilities created. What I couldn't develop was a method to organize that potency, channel the forces in a productive way. And their latent Writer potential? Hopeless. It was so diffuse, so weak, like trying to pick up a radio signal from Earth in the Andromeda Galaxy. And this was step one. I had to focus those minuscule waves into a laser beam to burn through a sheet of steel. The gulf between the idea and practice never looked so vast.

Of course, the final plan was to add together these feeble manipulations of spacetime through the Orbs. We needed some kind of initial lens. One not so powerful, taking a much more diffuse source, compacting it, and delivering it to the greater optic. We had to build a telepathic telescope.

It took a long time to solve this problem, months until they realized I could not be this instrument. While I could concentrate my thoughts, I could not focus those of the other Readers. Only *they* could do this, but how to teach them? The Xix tried as they had trained me. Perhaps because my abilities were so great to begin with, the Xixian training was productive. But not here. All efforts failed. The average human Reader was unable. The project stalled, and the chill deepened.

I was in despair when the monk came.

He was an old Tibetan man. White eyebrows and a bald head

perched atop a crimson and orange robe draped to the ground. He stood at the door Waythrel had opened to our chamber, looking neither toward me nor the alien beside him. His eyes searched the distance, a soft smile always on the edge of his expression. I sensed hesitancy in my Xixian friend.

"Ask him in, Waythrel," I said, and it invited him inside.

The ascetic bowed and entered. He walked to me and knelt, taking the hem of my black robes. I was getting used to this, my gradual deification in the eyes of my species. For whatever reason, they didn't brand me with the guilt of my choices. I miraculously escaped judgment. My abilities appeared magical to most, my strange appearance adding to the mystique. And I supposed that helpless desperation went a long way toward myth building. After Waythrel's lecture about my growing legendarium, I realized I could do little about it. However ridiculous, I let him prostrate himself.

"I am Chodak, Daughter of Time," he began.

I gasped. "Where did you hear that name?"

Images from the terrible nightmare returned, as did the last words I spoke with Richard. Outside my visions, I had heard one other person use the title—the scientist who had helped twist me into the abomination I was.

"Forgive me, Sighted One," he said, bowing further, his face touching the ground. An intensity sharpened his sentences. "It was spoken to me in a dream."

I took his hands and raised him. "Sit with me. Tell me about your vision." He tilted his head, and I thanked him. "And call me Ambra. No titles, please."

The old monk limped over to the couch in the chamber. We sat together as he spoke, an intense thrum through his every phrase. For the duration, he never released my hand. I found his constant smile healing.

"It was in my meditations, Ambra Dawn. Always, I see most clearly when in the deepest focus."

Waythrel danced over and stood apart from us. I sensed concentration in the alien but could not focus on its thoughts.

"Always, I seek to find you, to learn how your light will deliver us and save us from this darkness. But you are too hard to see, and the glare is too strong." He raised the index finger of each hand in unison, smiling. "Until last night. I found my being *inside* that of another. It was difficult to understand how this could happen. I traveled across the entire galaxy in a single moment and stepped within. I saw you with his eyes."

Waythrel interrupted. "You entered the awareness of another?"

The monk shook his head. "No, only his brain. A flesh in which his mind abided. Or so it felt."

What to think of this? "And what did you see?" I asked.

The old man closed his eyes. Dust motes danced in the air under the ceiling lamps. I thought of gnats darting in a green meadow beneath a hot June sun. The bright thought of Earth throbbed inside.

"I experienced a life in the time of a butterfly's breath."

"And did these experiences show you how the Daughter prevails?" asked Waythrel.

I suppressed a groan at the use of that title. The Xix were keen to build on my mythology. My alien friend was already weaving this man's language to fit its purposes, and doubtless not for the last time.

"No," he said, opening his eyes, the smile still there. "It was of a different time, a distinct space. One making little sense to my small soul."

I squeezed his hands. "Then why are you here, Chodak? There are many visions. Countless futures and confusing pasts."

"Because he loved you, Ambra Dawn," he said, his eyes shining. When I did not speak for several moments, he continued. "Not as we love the One who has become our light in this dark time. This and more. He adored you even more as a man loves a woman in the flesh, and he attended to your every movement. Through his eyes, I witnessed the deepest meditation of a lover for whom all time stops as his beloved turns her head or takes a step. Concentration on each detail, each hair strand, each breath. And always filled with adoration. Through his eyes, I also glimpsed *your* eyes. Deep, blind, green eyes of sadness, but with the joy of him in them. You were to be married."

I tensed. Was this vision a metaphor? Or had this monk seen into a future where some human might dare care for me? As I have told you, the reality of my deformity, my blindness, the monstrosity of my actions had shut down common expectations of our kind. And there had been no time, no chance to examine the idea of my womanhood. Not a single moment to exist in such a dimension. To shine this intimate light onto it was disorienting. It hurt.

I couldn't help myself. My thoughts leapt over to his mind, breaking a privacy I always try to respect. I gazed into his vision and grasped its truth. I experienced the adoration of a lover from a time yet to be. My own face stared back at me through the memories of the eyes of a possible future.

The monk smiled and patted my hand several times. "He loves and serves, and he awaits you. I came to tell you this, to tell you so you would know in a foretelling I found, you will be loved in this way."

The universe is cruel. More than anyone, I realized there would be no single chain of events, and even what has been could *unbe*. Was it better to know there existed the possibility of such affection? Knowing it would not be realized? Or best to live ignorant, never having felt the imaginative stirrings of desire in a dying

life? How could I sit there infatuated with the cyst-inspired hallucinations of an old Buddhist disciple?

Waythrel interrupted my thoughts. "Chodak, you said you see more clearly in your deepest meditations."

The monk nodded. "It is so."

"We of Xix study the focus of consciousness, the stepping out of it and becoming more, even as you become less. We trained the Daughter in our ways as best we could an alien mind. But you are human," it said, in a tone I had come to imagine as it smirking, "and a professional."

"Devotion is not a trade for us."

"I understand," it said, continuing to probe. "How did you find this man in your dream?"

The monk glanced upward and to his left. "I searched for Ambra Dawn and could not see for the light. But I found a tunnel, a passage leading toward her. One I might follow without becoming blinded by her radiance. I faced this direction and journeyed, and it took me to him."

"You *chose* this path? You *directed* your Read?"

Ice ran through me and my heart drummed. My emotions leapt to Waythrel. I understood.

Do you see? rang its thoughts. *Here, we may find our answer.*

"Yes," he smiled. "But only in great stillness."

Chapter 43

It is by logic that we prove, but by intuition that we discover. To know how to criticize is good, to know how to create is better.

Henri Poincaré

And so we stumbled on the process of prayer.

You read me right. *Prayer*. Ideas from an alien and a Buddhist monk who were part of our Reader cohort. But it wasn't so crazy a notion, after all.

You may not be aware, but before Earth died, a good bit of scientific research suggested meditation, prayer, whatever you want to call it, supercharged human cognition. It possessed a remarkable ability to alter brain states, focus consciousness, improve health. Jesus said: "Pray, and it will be as you believe." Yeah, not quite like the Bible has it. But I heard it from the rabbi's mouth, so trust me on this one. And he had a good-sized cyst, in case you were wondering.

What tradition had passed down over generations, and what science had begun to measure, was that prayer altered the mind.

Because of what we knew about sentience, that meant prayer also changed the world around the mind. Given the human Writer potential, it should have been obvious what was really going on. Meditation focused and stilled thoughts. Isolated our awareness from the five other senses. It allowed our sixth sense the stillness and quiet, the resources it needed to blossom. And that's where the magic of humanity is born. "Be still and know that I am God." In some strange way, we've always known the truth.

Our monk had delivered a solution to the misdirected energies of our Readers. Waythrel had seen the answer before we could have hoped to on our own. That night, we began an intense training in the thousand-year-old practice of Tibetan meditation.

Chodak and I worked together to direct this giant, prophetic prayer group. I had discovered an alien form of mindfulness with the Xix, but he taught the Earthlings among us a more *human* way. It was far more effective than the Xixian approach. We performed basic practices throughout the day over several weeks.

The results were transformative. Measurable by the special equipment our alien allies had set up. The success motivated us to continue the arduous hours of stillness. I could see with my strange sight the energies of the Readers brightening. The diffuse fog condensed, forming bobbing will-o'-the-wisp shimmers. They danced around the huddled meditating groups.

It felt crazy, despite all the miracles and madness I had seen. But it worked. Intense sessions of meditation and feedback snowballed. It wasn't long before I drove the spacetime distortions of our group into a more organized and malleable form. You have to understand, each was so much weaker than me. Alone, they could affect little in the physical continuum. Gatherings as large as ten or twenty had little power.

These focused *prayers* of hundreds of Readers registered on the instruments. They congealed into blobs, colorful and alive like

those in a lava lamp. They were clay I could reach out and touch, tug—*shape*.

Saints we weren't, but we spiked the Xixian detectors. We were getting close. We had a method to bring together and integrate the potency of those gathered in a way I could channel and control.

But still, not enough. Not *near* sufficient, even should the Xix and I succeed in using the Orb to focus the forces one thousand times. The task required so much more.

It was the combination of moving through time and space making it so difficult, not like adding the difficulties of one to the other. To stretch back into the past and alter spacetime in a major way required multiplying the energies involved. Hundreds of thousands with our prescient ability had to participate. At least. There weren't the numbers left in the galaxy for such a deed. Or if there were, gathering them together would be impossible under the eyes of the Dram and the needs of interstellar travel.

But the numbers did exist. Waiting, if I could reach them.

As we developed this newfound power of prayer, the Xix approached me. Their scientists believed we could use the Orb to channel the spacetime manipulations (with my help, of course). All that remained was the little task of getting those hordes of Readers onboard with the plan. Millions who lived decades, hundreds, or thousands of years in the past. On an Earth that no longer existed. In times and cultures diverse and distant. I had to find a way to reach them and convince them all to *pray* for our deliverance.

Thank God, I had an idea. Unfortunately, we first had to deal with an unfriendly visit from our insectile hunters.

Chapter 44

You need chaos in your soul to give birth to a dancing star.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Michael burst into our room. His shoulders slammed against the sides of the sliding door as it opened, bouncing him sideways. Waythrel and I sat across from each other, unmoving. I reclined on the couch, the Xix in a chair of special design. We were in deep telepathic communication over our recent progress with the Reader groups. Michael's disruption forced us to shake ourselves out of the trance. To help us along, the entire base was plunged into red emergency power lighting as alarms sounded.

"Dram warships," he gasped, bent over with hands on his knees. "Five of them surfing off the Orb String." He glanced at equipment on the wall. "You really shouldn't turn off your communications."

"*Five?*" I had seen the damage *one* of them could do.

"They know we're here," he continued. "I don't know how

they discovered, but that doesn't matter. We were too optimistic. It was bound to happen." He stared at me. "Could you not have seen it?"

I squeezed my temples. "I should have, but I have been so busy with the project. And...there is something interfering with my Reading of the Dram."

Waythrel's eyes spun toward me. "Interfering? How is that possible?"

"I don't know. Maybe some kind of shielding? Whenever I look toward Dram, its noise and static."

The Xix danced around in the impossible Xixian fashion. "Ambra, we have to get you off this moon! Michael, what transports are available?"

"No time! They sprung this trap well. We detected their war boats minutes ago. They came off the Strings at a tremendous velocity, aimed right at us. Already their longer-range weapons have disabled our sensor drones. We can only track them from lunar arrays. The Xix team has taken over, redirected all power to defenses, but it won't last long."

I sensed a bubbling anxiety within Waythrel, focused on more than me.

"We had no advanced warning," said the alien. "Even through our Time Tree relays. This can mean only one thing."

Michael nodded, winded and weary. "Word came quickly after the ships appeared. There has been a mass culling of your representatives on their homeworld, and spreading to other closely linked systems."

"And Xix itself?" I could feel the creature close to dissolving. Its mental patterns were much simpler now, primitive, emotional states dominating the structure.

"No reports of any attacks. Yet. They might not have the evidence to suspect extensive Xixian involvement. Maybe they are just purging Dram as a precaution."

Waythrel darted. "There must be a craft we can use to try an escape!"

"They'll vaporize it in seconds. You know nothing will get by."

I couldn't stand it anymore. "Should we just sit here until they liquefy everything? Is that better?"

He shouted. "I don't have a damn plan! We're helpless."

My mind raced. The first explosions shook the settlement. Dramian weapons impacting the lunar surface. At that distance, with the generators we had, it would be a few minutes before they could target the base. But no more.

"Okay, assemble the Readers in the meditation chamber."

He gawked, perplexed.

I roared. "Michael! Get them all down there, now!"

A dawning awareness spread through Waythrel's mental web. "Ambra, no. It is much too dangerous."

"What's too dangerous?" Michael asked, turning his furrowed face between us. "Why do we need the Readers?"

I pushed past him, sprinting down the hallway. *Madness*. A blind woman dashing through narrow corridors, trailing fingers across the walls, tracing thoughts along the Strings.

I shouted to the pair behind me. "Waythrel, gather the Xix techs and fire up the damn machines! We've only got minutes!"

By the time we had critical numbers, we were absorbing significant damage. The structure rocked with the impacts, moon dust clogging the air. *Five warships!* Enough firepower to destroy an entire Earth metropolis ten times over. They wouldn't even have to vaporize us. Knock out the life support on this airless and frigid satellite—*the end*. Of course, the Dram would make sure and melt the base into the rock.

The Xixian scientists engaged the amplifiers or whatever they were that channeled our spacetime manipulations. Their crew performed coolly under pressure, much better than my brethren.

"Everyone!" I shouted over the din of war and human panic. "Listen to me!"

Useless. People hollered, darted around, clutching each other. My voice could not penetrate the cacophony.

We didn't have time for this!

I closed my eyes and resorted to more brutal means.

It was a brief burst, but harsh. Several voices cried out. Those in the room grabbed their skulls, shutting their eyes in pain. A few fell to the floor, tears in their eyes. One did not rise and remained motionless. Betrayed eyes gaped in dawning understanding.

"I'm sorry!" I screamed, as much to kill my own thoughts of what I had done as to focus their attention. "Listen to me! The Dram will destroy this base in minutes! We can't beat them in a fight. We can't stop or repel their weapons. We can't run away."

The rumbling from above filled the silence in the room.

I swallowed and pressed on. "We have *one* chance to defeat them. When the Orbs are opened, there is a terrible distortion of spacetime. Unless controlled, they will devour anything nearby. Including enemy warships."

I heard Waythrel in my mind. *Ambra, hurry! Time is running out!*

"I can activate them, but I can only do it if I'm close enough. And I don't know if I can control them from this distance. Not without your help! This is the time to use all we have been practicing for. Right now, I need you to quiet yourselves and harmonize and reach out with me. Together, we can open the Orb and draw the Dram ships into the vortex!"

"What if you can't do it from here, even with our help?" a woman called out.

"Then we will die," cried the Xix. "But doing nothing is certain death."

The monk stepped forward, his smile a weak shadow. "And if you cannot control the Orb?"

I reached mentally to the alien and its thoughts echoed my own. "I don't know. I think it could consume the entire system."

Voices buzzed at this, but a strong earthquake shook the room, and dust rained down on us. The chatter ended.

Waythrel barked, "Unless you survive, your star system is already dead! The risk is delay. Take your positions! Compose yourselves. Find your focus and direct it to Ambra!"

They listened. The group crouched and sat, trembling. Together they frantically tried to reach a Zen-like calm.

Have you ever tried to reach a meditative peace frantically, with Dram warships blasting the foundations out from under you?

It wasn't working. The ultimate irony: to save our lives, we had to obtain an enlightened mode, where time and worry disappear. In minutes. Before we died.

Sensing their inability to concentrate, the old monk called out reminders of his teachings. He stepped among the frightened souls, trying to coax them to relinquish their attachments to themselves. To safety. To life itself. To seek a state of detachment where death does not matter in order to preserve our hides.

That wasn't working, either.

I became desperate as more explosions rocked the base. Once again, survival drove me to actions I never would have imagined in saner moments. I thought back to my invasion of their minds, my psychic slap to calm them down. I had stunned them all, damaged the brain of one, to get their attention.

Was my sole option disturbance?

If I could cause damage, couldn't I also heal? I decided I would try, regardless of whether it amounted to a form of mind control. I projected my emotions over the Readers before me. Waves of intricate spacetime distortions interacted with their mental fields. At first, everything was out of phase, clashing. I adapted, working to understand each personality I touched. One

by one, my calming thoughts began to resonate. One by one, I drove out the terror and panic, and they relaxed. They focused as we had trained them. They redirected their own awareness towards me.

Waythrel's consciousness flared from across the room as it deduced what was happening.

I love you, Ambra Dawn, but I fear you. Now you control even the souls of others.

I didn't have the luxury to question the ethics of what I was doing. This was the one way I knew to save our lives. And it was probably not going to work.

Chapter 45

A set is a Many that allows itself to be thought of as a One.

Georg Cantor

I floated midway between the approaching Dram warships and the lunar base.

Like in the dreams of Earth from before, I had no body. I suffered no injury from the vacuum of space or the scalding radiation of the sun. I was a disembodied sentient knot of spacetime, projected from inside the moon itself, the product of my own mental structure and efforts and the amplification of hundreds of Readers and Xixian field modulators.

We had made the dream-state real.

I didn't have time to examine how this had happened. I didn't ask what I had become. And I was not traveling alone. The entire Reader chorus accompanied me. A multidimensional entanglement of consciousnesses. We became the synthesis of the sentience-spacetime continuum Thel had introduced to my inade-

quate human intelligence. Theoretical mind matrices that looked great on paper. We had also made them real.

My awareness dominated the matrix. I shaped and held it together. But thousands of independent thought threads were entwined. More than entwined, *interwoven*. We transformed into something greater than a choir singing in harmony.

Far greater.

It was the birth of a unified, harmonic consciousness. Transcending our individuality. Formed of the combined strength and power of multiple minds, augmented by the advanced alien technology. Each self was a molecule of water transitioning into a new state beyond that before. Bonding in a connected lattice. Decreasing entropy. Crystallizing.

We had become something *Else*. We awakened, the *we* shifting to a single *I*. A newborn opening its eyes.

Some portion of me was still separated, meditating with the others inside the moon. But what it was of me, of all of us, that was outside—I to this day do not know. The Xix do not understand. An ego, a self, projected and concentrated. It could dissolve without complication—that strange new *I* falling back asleep. The process would leave no damage to the rest of us concentrating in lotus positions in a dust-choked room entombed on Earth's satellite.

When I speak of "me" or "I" in this extraordinary encounter with the Dram, the words change meaning. I was not merely Ambra Dawn. I became Ambra swelled and enhanced by a horde of other minds. No, not swelled. Not simply expanded. *Altered*. I rose as something else whose pieces included Ambra Dawn, Waythrel of Xix, and hundreds of other sentients. But it was *beyond* them.

The enemy energy beams passed through "me" without effect, and their explosive missiles did not detonate. Nor did they impact the

base. Already, I had left sharp warpings of space behind me. As the radiative and solid weaponry followed available paths in spacetime, they curved, seemingly repelled by the settlement itself, and scattered around the remaining surface of the moon. It was an intuitive shield I constructed in my efforts to will their weapons away from the habitat.

Their inability to target us ignited the Dram soldiers to rage. They unleashed a bombardment unlike anything I'd witnessed. Five powerful warcraft unloaded on the little lunar fortification. The onslaught impacted an invisible wall in a prismatic spray. Explosions of colors cast stark shadows on the moon's dull exterior.

Part of my mind rejoiced. They were draining their energy supplies. When the gravitational vortex came, they would have that much less with which to resist it. I could maintain this shield long enough to debilitate them. I felt no anxiety or need for haste. I swam in a divine calm.

Ambra, open the Orb!

I discerned the intricate threads of Waythrel's consciousness calling from within.

Ambra, now! There is no time!

It was hard to feel the same desperation out here. Without the full flood of my body's limbic soup—its adrenaline, cortisol, hormones, oxygen, sugar—I knew a detached peace. And what was the hurry? The stupid Dram army was just draining its batteries, anyway.

It's okay, Waythrel. I've blocked them. Let them empty their ammunition.

Ambra, please! It is not about them, it is you! Your body—something is wrong. Its temperature is dropping. Your heart rate is slowing. You must return! Open the Orb!

Strange. *My body*. Yes, I could still sense it. Back there, linked by a thread to this new me. I guess my body had to be significant.

If I were to continue my journey, end the Dram war, it would need to survive, would it not?

Was this motivating? I wasn't sure it was. In this altered state of being, all my ideas of what possessed importance took on foreign forms. Eons shrunk to ages, parsecs became short excursions. Matter and energy and time mixed and spun and transformed in millions of fashions.

What if my body died? We were clueless prisoners. Caged in sacks of meat. Blind to the vastness, the openness, the *possibilities* of existence. Our vision was myopic, tunneled by bone and blood and brain. What I had become was something divergent. I was not unhappy or harmed in this state. To the contrary, I was empowered, free. I could explore the universe as never before. Forever.

Ambra! No! We feel your thoughts. Please, don't leave us. We can't follow. I am a Xix, but...I...we...we love you.

The Orb fluxed in my mind's eye. It was a pulse of power, a flash, a blinding detonation, and it had not been part of our plan. I had not reached out to it.

Instead, *it* stretched out, seeking *me*. A tendril of radiance sped at greater than light speeds and targeted me like a missile. I could not move or escape its approach. It struck me as a mental blow. It surrounded.

I was wrapped in an energy field, not of cold indifference, not of some mechanical production, but composed of something much more organic. Something *alive*. More than alive. It had a will of its own.

The Orb was conscious.

And it spoke to me.

Chapter 46

In love all the contradictions of existence merge themselves and are lost. Only in love, are unity and duality not at variance. Love must be one and two at the same time.

Rabindranath Tagore

Once again, I awoke after an ageless sleep to stare up toward the nightmare form of an alien medic.

Monitors beeped around my body, collected data, vital signs examined by the wonders of extraterrestrial technology. The room was shaded, and still the weak light hurt my blind eyes. The occipital lobe at the back of my oblong head was obliterated, but my retina could still very much feel pain.

Sore and cold. I blinked several times, tears pooling. An awareness beyond the five senses grew, and the consciousness of many creatures washed over me—human and Xixian.

And of *another* in the distance. Having experienced it, I would never again lose the sense of its presence. Powerful. Quiescent. Anomalous and yet more familiar than myself. I knew something

was different. Something profound had changed. I just could not remember what.

Close at hand, the mind of Waythrel. I reached out to it.

Hello again, my dear Xix.

The room burst into applause. With my prescience, I scanned the immediate past. A small crowd hovered around my hospital bed. They cheered and wept, smiles and melting anxiety washing the room like a rainstorm. Their wounded joy woke a smile from me.

"Were my thoughts so loud?" I asked through a croaked voice.

Laughter and more tears.

The creature touched my forehead with one of its many tendrilled extensions. "We are bound together now. We sense each other as never before. We nearly lost you, foolish human child."

My sleep had been dreamless, empty, and my memory was a torn patchwork. "What happened? My last thoughts—they are of you calling for me to open the Orb, and of...something else."

The room was silent. The alien continued to stroke my temple. "You are our prophet, Ambra. The experience traumatized your mind. You cannot remember right now, but a higher power spoke through you."

"A higher power? What do you mean? What about the Dram? What *happened*?"

"Our enemies are gone. Where, we do not know. You unlocked the portal, or, as we understand better now, It opened *for* you. It dragged the ships into wormholes, sent to some distant place. Even a remote time, perhaps. No report exists of them appearing in any system. The base is secure. As soon as you recover, we will return to our training. To our plan." Its thoughts reached out to the others with a fluidity and skill I had never sensed before. "I think you will find our performance will improve significantly."

A wonderful victory! Joy warmed me, but its other words were unsettling.

"What do you mean it opened *for* me?"

"Do you remember nothing, young one? Nothing of the personality that embraced you in the emptiness of the void? That brought you back to us because, not only our love called out, but because it loved us?"

I sat in the bed and pulled my knees to my chest, wrapping my arms around them. A dream reawakened, a golden warmth surrounding me, a caress of light and gravity penetrating my consciousness.

"The Orb," I whispered.

The events rushed back through my awareness. The detachment of projection into space. The Dram military. The emotional call of Waythrel and the other Readers for me to return. The response to that cry from...*could it be*?

"Yes!" said the Xix, a happiness, giddiness, spilling from its mind. "We were all linked in unison as your body was dying, as you began to detach from your fleshly form—from us. It came when our breaking hearts cried to you, and it answered our prayers. It communicated with you, and you listened. Then you spoke back. It opened, the ships scattered. And you returned."

I couldn't piece together the encounter. The shards of memory were strewn in my consciousness, pieces here and there and none fitting, too many critical elements missing.

"What did it say to me?"

Waythrel was silent. I sensed the wonder around the room. The hundreds of humans and aliens in elation knew something that I could not yet recall.

I cannot explain it. Not even in our vocabulary are there concepts. Read, Ambra. Scan my experience.

When you first learn a language, after you have studied for some time the syntax and grammar and spent the necessary days

and months immersed in the spoken reality of the tongue, you reach a first important threshold of progress. At this point, you can grasp a great deal of what others speak, a fluency in comprehension. But your speech will lag, flounder, and fail. You will stumble to match the facility of your understanding with expressions from your own mind and mouth. So it was here.

Waythrel's thoughts opened to me. An experience poured that I'm unable to describe in this shallow book with these empty and clumsy words. I understood it, I understand it, but I can't express it. I can say that the vague prophecies, poems, and scriptures of human mythology, those speaking of the divine, they were made mute by this vision.

It was a singular interaction between a cosmic spacetime anomaly and our multiplied and projected consciousness. It was a revelation from the Orb to hundreds of Reader minds interwoven like counterpoint with mine. An entity scores of alien species had manipulated for crude gain, so far beneath its true purpose, that it was like ants walking across a discarded telescope to bridge a small stream.

The Orb had spoken.

In this mystical experience were fragments of universal truths even our enhanced state still could not understand. In our separated individuality, we grasped much less. The divine had entered the room, and we could not comprehend the dust it scattered. We could only stand in awe.

The visions from Waythrel stimulated the full release of my own memories. It was beautiful and terrible. It was so vast in space and time, yet localized and intimate, it generated mental vertigo. As if you went deep inside yourself, grasping the sharp awareness of existence, and from that dimensionless singularity, exploded the entirety of universal creation. Trillions of galaxies, their billions of star systems, planets, living forms, civilizations, cultures, science, and religion blasted like a fire hose through your mind.

And binding all of it together, in the middle of a thousand dimensions of complexity, was an essence, simple and impenetrable. Eternal. Indestructible. A unified force coupling everything else together, giving it structure, and generating the laws of mathematics and physics underscoring reality.

Of all the words I have in my own language for this thing, only one comes close. It is a miscarriage of meaning. It distorts. It lacks. But it is the distant echo of a dream whispered across infinity. It is not God, for the idea of God is too human, too finite and malleable. The word felt wrong.

It is not faith or hope, for in the end these fail before the darkness.

The one word that I dare use—is Love.

Chapter 47

The child ever dwells in the mystery of ageless time, unobscured by the dust of history.

Rabindranath Tagore

Not everything could be transcendent revelation.

Intergalactic love was one thing. The practical need to try to reverse a cataclysm, quite another. Hanging over us still spun the small matter of the dead planet we orbited, and the deteriorating remnants of the life it once sheltered.

We retained the powerful experience of our encounter with the Orb. It would never leave us. It recast our psychic gatherings, propelling us to levels of integration and mutual perception unattainable before. It would empower us to complete our quest, enable us to perform the exploration of chronospace required.

The hunt for human Readers of the past began in earnest. And you won't believe where we landed the first time we launched ourselves backward in time.

Maybe we were all a little cocky, now that the group had

become some Celestial Sphere-integrated, precognitive, Dram-warship-trashing spacetime commando team. Or perhaps it was because we were just new and clueless to this bizarre occupation of communal-mind time travel. More explanatory, we were just a sad collection of broken mortals dying off near our grilled homeworld, and our first failure was the best we could manage.

Whatever the reason, none of us, including the Xix, anticipated the wee little problem of my focusing into history and zeroing in on the strongest Reader signals I could perceive. It was enough trying to move through the Orb Time Tree, navigate its labyrinths with my hundreds of fellow intellects. We also had to discern within the spacetime fabric the lights and undulations bearing the unmistakable stamp of humanity and surf the strings to those points in the continuum.

Our naive logic sent us straight to the brightest collections of these Readers in the past. Surely, they would be the ones we needed to persuade to spread the message and form the massive trans-chronological prayer group we envisioned.

Our multidimensional knot of consciousness erupted over breathtaking vistas of an older Earth. A landscape before magma had spilled over its surface. A garden predating concrete and industrial pollutants that would tarnish our solar system's gem. An Eden radiating life and potential. The more primal world of our ancient ancestors.

Every mind I carried with me swooned to drink the beauty of our planet once again. The azure skies dotted with puffy white. The breezes stirring smells no longer alien, but of home. Leaf, grass, and moss-green, branch-brown soil. Bird's song. If a disembodied group consciousness could weep, ours did.

The resplendent spectacle touched the Xix among us as well. They now shared our awareness. That intimacy immersed them in a direct manner to human experiences, memories, preferences, and sensations. The standard telepathy of Readers was a miracle but

was a pale gray beside the bright color of the integrated intelligence. With my mind stitching the collective together, they felt what it was like to be a creature of Earth. These linked perceptions further merged individuals into the whole.

Some surprise greeted our arrival in an early age of humanity. Most had assumed we would encounter the greatest aggregation of powerful Readers in the modern era. That recent period provided the benefits of the population boom and the technology to spread our message.

But perhaps it was not so strange. Weren't the faith and devotion of the inhabitants of ancient epochs unique? Their prayers could compensate in intensity for what they lacked in numbers.

The sightseeing was poignant, stunning. But we had traversed time for a terrible purpose. I focused our mind on the task at hand. A vigorous source of human spacetime distortion was near. I followed the warped pathways through a forest and up a steep slope. Smoke spilled to the sky, and the indistinct sounds of voices hummed ahead. With increasing anticipation, our little thought matrix sped upward and broke through the trees.

We burst into a clearing. Stones peppered the ground, the tree line failing. Snow and ice carpeted the terrain. A large fire blazed in the center of a rock-lined pit. A loud chanting saturated the air, rhythmic, accompanied by a strange music.

Banging on hide drums and piping on bone flutes, a group of short men wrapped in wolf hides danced. They were unkempt, bearded, muscled, and tan-skinned. In the interior of the gathering, a faction of barbarian women presided over a ritual slaughter.

A deer sprawled at the focus of the concentric circles, strapped with ropes to the soil, its eyes wide with fear. A woman knelt down beside it and lay a jagged white blade to its neck. She let out a long and sustained howl. As one, with a final crescendo in the chanting and potent drum beat, the music ceased.

She slit its throat.

After searching the past for the most powerful groups of Readers we could find, we had landed in the middle of the religious rites of our prehistoric ancestors.

Thinking back on our efforts, it should have been obvious something like this would happen. The human mutations that led to our sixth sense occurred many thousands of years preceding the modern era. I was to discover later that the individual genetic and tissue alterations had already gestated in our hominid forebears before *Homo sapiens*. What singled us out, what gave us the edge over the other hominids, the wild animals, and nature itself, was the rapid development of that organ in the middle of our brains allowing us to forecast.

Sensitivity to the spacetime matrix changed the game. Seeing the future, the dangers and opportunities it presented, even in the vague manner of dreams and visions, was to become the one-eyed species in an ecosystem of the blind. Like the other senses that had conferred tremendous survival advantages in a murderous universe, being able to Read altered everything. Once again, we were to learn it was not our supposed grand intelligence that made us king of the hill. What elevated humanity was a pre-cancerous neural growth.

Nothing like having the foreknowledge that a lion is coming around the bend. Or that threatening weather is approaching. Or that food lurks *this way*. Nothing like the sense that mating with so-and-so just *feels* like a better future. When our ancestors forecast, when they Read their environment, they summoned a power over it no other living thing possessed. They *chose* from the strands of possible futures.

Nature selected for this trait with enthusiasm. In a harsher epoch, before we had developed world-mastering technology, powerful Readers survived to pass on their special heredity.

Simmer for several thousand generations. By the period in which we found ourselves, every human present was as gifted a Reader as I had encountered from the modern age. *Every one of them*. No wonder they had produced such a strong and localized clairvoyant signal.

Our forthcoming technical mastery of the Earth—aided in large part in later ages by the alien races who discovered our prescient abilities—removed that harsh selective pressure. Humans in whom the genes produce no psychic cyst could survive as well as those sporting the growth in their brains. Better, because the prophetic traits extract a price both physically and psychologically. By the time I was born, Readers were rare, prized like bluefin tuna, and treated about as well.

Not with the cave folks. They were each bright with it and sensitive. In fact, they detected our presence. Within seconds of the dying animal's drowning cry, as the blood poured over some ritualistic rock carved with strange symbols, the entire group turned twitchy. They stood, one after the other, and *faced* us! I could feel their minds reaching out. The tendrils of our thought matrix served as a warm fire their hands probed. They knew we were there. *They sensed us*.

What did they think we were? Something elemental. Divine. Our visiting future knot of aliens and humans perhaps stimulated oral traditions that would shape the mythologies of later cultures.

The matriarch mounted a rock and held toward us a strange relic—thorned branches of some bush, pruned and adorned with animal bones and rocks. She cried out to the skies with some new chant. The other women and men knelt down and prostrated themselves, bowing in our direction. It would have sent chills down my spine if I had one.

But what was there to do? With the purest optimism, we tried to interact with them. It was a disaster. Their minds had never encountered something so strong, so abstract or complex. We

could give them images of simple things, sensations and conceptions of a life they had known and understood. These they could grasp without distress. But to explain our errand, our need, or what we hoped they might accomplish? Hopeless. All such attempts led to frustration and fear, building to madness in our contacts.

After days of trying, the group fled the cave, terrified. They conducted rituals while exiting. Their shamans marked the territory with crafted artifacts and drawings in the dirt. It was a prehistoric protection spell from the demonic forces. After several hours, they were gone, and we had no desire to follow them. The most powerful and concentrated Readers known had rejected us. They could not help save their descendants.

We withdrew from this time period, the weight of failure demoralizing. Our first efforts, our transcendent cohort of mixed species coming off a high in thwarting the attack of the galaxy's dominant military, had reached out to the past, found unequaled talent for our project, and had nothing to show for it.

Nothing but the distinction of having created a haunted mountain in the depths of history.

Chapter 48

It is very hard to find a black cat in a dark room,
especially when there is no cat.

Proverb

Our next attempts were also disasters, and for similar reasons. Despite the minds and cultures we encountered being more "advanced." I'll try to explain, but please be patient with a short lesson to help you understand our route through the history of human precognition.

And forgive the writing. As the content reaches greater abstraction, the medium of this language, the limited musings of the author's mind are increasingly unable to cope. It's a world of frustration for him and for me. He grasps at vocabulary to contain ideas beyond the dimensions of the words available. In this wild effort, as he senses failure, yet cannot summon the tools to escape defeat, the prose enters a strange sort of psychosis. One moment, I am myself, and the next I sound like the complicated musings of a

Xixian philosopher. In neither incarnation does the full import of my intent shine through. But let's give it a go.

All the major advancements in our civilizations occurred from the coupling of several critical components. The arbitrariness of climate, pathogens, and resource availability played their part. Geographic position influenced those variables and others. The randomness of genetic recombination was always integral, especially regarding illness. But as we'll see, it played an additional role.

The most favorable combination of these elements produced the world's great civilizations. The Fertile Crescent in the Middle East. India, China, and Japan in Asia. The Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas of Central and South America. The European enlightenments of Greece and Western Europe. Prolonged periods of plenty, a general lack of catastrophic outbreaks, along with specific availability of resources (either local or imported), set the foundation.

But we discovered those factors weren't enough.

Scanning through the past, our community uncovered startling truths. Unusual aggregations of Readers underlay every cultural zenith. Because mastery of agriculture had reduced the selective pressures for survival, the cyst genomics became less important. The key genes could be lost without major repercussions. In other words, civilization diluted prescient potential in the human population. Enter genetic stochasticity. Only when the alleles combined in a fortunate fashion to further the relative number with psychic sensitivity did we see the impact of our neural organ on culture.

I'd explored reams of history from my cage on Earth. The seeming randomness in the rise and fall of civilizations always mystified me. Why had epochs of such great cultural and intellectual progress exploded from nowhere and then vanished into oblivion? Historians fixated on what they knew, resources and environment. But these factors didn't explain why some cultures

with all they needed stagnated. Often, the explanations degraded to racial and behavioral theories. Projections more to do with justifying the superiority of the historian's self-image than with facts. And that's because the critical data were missing for all of them.

When the density of Readers was high enough in a core group, their combined sixth sense kindled their awareness, opened their minds, and stimulated exploration and creativity. Think of the world's peoples as being blind but for a few "seers." These could perceive a blurred fog of the visual spectrum. This imperfect stimulus to the neurological structure of the brain set things moving that wouldn't otherwise have moved. New ideas, divergent perspectives, faith in a bigger universe beyond simple "sound."

I can tell you as someone who has seen so much more than anyone else, you have no idea of how deep, how multilayered, how *different* reality is than you imagine it without a spacetime-perceiving organ. It is so obvious in retrospect. These random concentrations of Readers in the right places at favorable times were bound to drive human cultural development.

It also explained the strange tendency of cultures to lose the "spark." Following great progress, they would drift as subsequent generations lost dynamicism and creativity. Many fell into decay. Always, such societies were haunted with the shame of failing their forebears.

The reasons were mysterious and ascribed by sermonizing historians to lax morals and other aspects of the culture. But usually, the cause was far less moralistic—genomic mixing randomly diluted the genes required for our sixth sense. The improbable accumulation of the foresighted that birthed the civilization returned to the standard distribution. The number of individuals with developed prophetic organs declined. The population lost critical prescient mass, and the society languished.

The Xix were the first to perceive this. As alien anthropolo-

gists, they dissected the development of our species without our biases. Once we understood, confusion switched to excitement. We had a Reader-detector giving a historical signal! Those we needed to find abounded where humanity made intellectual and cultural leaps, when their minds were unusually open to transformative ideas.

And we had a heck of a story to bring them.

But our enthusiasm was misguided. In a demoralizing series of tragic encounters, we dove into these bubbling cultures and sought out the powerful Readers. We communed with them. We explained reality and our terrible plight. We pleaded with our ancestors to deliver us.

And we shattered their sanity.

What did we learn after such ugly disappointments? Even when receptive to original concepts, the human mind can stretch only so far. Once again, our biases from an age of quantum mechanics, relativity, space travel, and extraterrestrial life misled us. We took for granted how much, and how slowly, expectations had broadened over thousands of years.

For most of recorded history, the Earth was the center of the universe. Atoms were unknown. Spirits spoke from stones and demons caused disease. Our hyper-modern, alien narrative threw too many bizarre notions at them. Their minds tended to break, not blossom, under the strain.

Not all. Unusual individuals accepted our message, although they didn't understand it. They spread it. But the people of their times assigned them the role of mystics or madmen. Sometimes we indeed drove them mad with the visions we shared. We were the stimulus for several human religious and philosophical movements. We triggered suicides. We helped spawn persecutions like the Salem witch trials. We walked with Jesus and Buddha.

The journey was amazing, unexpected, but useless to the one task that mattered. However hard we tried to convey the impor-

tant essence of our story, we failed. We encouraged people to pray for the salvation of humanity, but the idea of altering spacetime as we needed them to was too abstract. Instead, their prayers assumed shapes they could comprehend and access. Futile and provincial.

So we surrendered. After months of engaging the most exceptional eras in human history, pleading and coaxing and explaining, we gave up. Our bodies and emotions were drained.

We settled on our one remaining option. What we couldn't achieve with the brilliant few of bygone ages, we would seek with the far more dim, but numerous, populations of the modern period. Mediocrity with multiplication would reign supreme.

The Xix had also run the spreadsheets. The strength of the brightest Readers from the past didn't add up. Not when their powers were measured and their numbers counted. Ambra Dawns were in short supply.

The equations told a simple tale. Only in the contemporary era, when the world's population soared to unprecedented levels, would there be a sufficient amalgamation of potential for what we required. More than we needed. But only if we could get them on board. Only if our message was convincing and moving. Only if enough took action.

And that was the essence of the problem. Even in this period, after Einstein, after quantum weirdness, when science-fiction novels and films had introduced millions, perhaps billions, to the ideas of relative time, curved space, multi-universes—in an era where such absurd notions were not tied to a religion or dogma but could lead to further scientific thoughts about cause and effect—even in this age, how to convince anyone *this story* was legitimate so that they might take the vulnerable plunge?

Working against us was that society boiled with cynicism. The loss of previous cultural values and touchstones stirred chaos and disbelief into most deliberations, external and internal. When all

authority, teachers, church, state, even family were objects of distrust, what were we to do? How to reach from the future and persuade people to pursue actions so humbling, so silly and antiquated, as to pray? To save humanity from fantastical events that had yet to happen?

Some of us argued for establishing new religions. These contended that, through religious certainty, we could focus the minds as we would need. Despite misgivings from many, we made several attempts to achieve this end.

All were spectacular failures. Those open to the concept of *revelation* also were the least inclined to be rigorous in thought. With astounding creativity, they modified our visions to suit their own emotional needs. Cults arose. The odd technological religion. We were gifted at creating pseudo-scientific doomsday sects. One way or the other, all our creations distorted the message. It would have been a comedy if it weren't so tragic.

We moved on from the idea of generating new religions. We explored the manipulation of political movements, nation-states, cultural fads, and ideology. All had certain attractive features to achieving our goals. Each suffered from one or more fatal flaws that revealed the bankruptcy of such approaches.

In the end, we had abandoned the best and brightest Readers for the average. We had turned our backs on the elevated routes of religion, philosophy, and culture. What remained?

The lowest common denominator, the one commonality across cultures possessing the largest numbers, the greatest budgets, and the longest staying power: *entertainment*. In the modern era, nothing could move people and resources faster than a great story told well. We knew we had an amazing tale, but storytellers we were not.

So we hunted for them. We sought out poets and playwrights, novelists and musicians. We engaged with those receptive to initial probes. We struggled to bring about the telling of their future so it

would capture hearts across the world. To find Readers. To convince them.

You know how this ends. You're holding the resulting artifact right now. After everything in this long and insane journey, this book is how we have reached you.

Chapter 49

Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment.

Rumi

Entombed in a rocky base dug into the bowels of the moon, stumbling on a sequestered garden is a miracle. Imagine a sanctuary where light and shade, stone and tree, life and death are balanced, interlaced in respect. A holy place.

The designers must have been both human and Xixian. Evidence overflowed for aesthetics from the spirit of our species. The quiet fountains, the overhanging branches, the marbled columns approached by grass-shrouded footpaths. Such magic could not sprout from the alien souls of the Xix. But the realization of this beauty in our lunar cave was beyond us. The amazing simulation of Earth's atmosphere-filtered sunlight. The acceleration of growth in the towering beeches. The local replication of the gravity we had known most of our lives. These had the sixfold symmetric fingerprints of our foreign benefactors all over them.

It was perhaps the most beautiful synergy of human and

extraterrestrial work I had encountered. Soft shadows from a spring morning dappled the grass with intertwined patterns from the branches and leaves. I padded on the overgrown marbled path, my steps silent on the moss, footfalls gentle and solemn.

I approached a raised platform of stone. A marble slab capped the polished granite. Resting on top glowed a golden bowl filled with fragrant oil. Floating on the surface was a wick embedded in a porous material. A flame surrounded the thread, the radiance of the plasma flickering over the sea of hydrocarbons.

I knelt down and bowed my head. Using my second sight, I read the words my blind eyes could not:

Richard Cross, His Memory is Eternal.

So simple. All the more powerful for it.

"It's time, Richard," I whispered. "We're going to try again today. I've found him. He'll tell our story."

The work of the Xixian scientists had culminated in a new technology. Our experiences with the Orb had unified the Reader cohort. We had gained wisdom through our clumsy apprenticeship in exploring minds of the past. All under the gun—limited time and extreme danger had focused our efforts. We had repelled two more Dram warship attacks. Newly deployed alien sentries brought rumors of a third armada, the largest yet. The bugs were determined to destroy us on the moon. They didn't know what we plotted, but suspected I was here, and that was enough.

I was not so concerned about the weapons of our obsessed enemy—I knew how to handle those with the power of the Orb. Something more nebulous was eating at my mind. The last attack had been different. I had more trouble altering spacetime to block the attacks. Interference, and I could localize the source to the attacking ships. Something was fighting me at this new level, in the arena of space and time.

But I had no knowledge of this enhanced threat. Creature or machine? One or many? Destroyed or returning? Right now, I

held the upper hand. But for how long? What was this challenge from the Dram? Would their efforts overwhelm me? I didn't know how much time we had left. And our quest could not fail.

Our plan required a catalyst to convert a small input of energy from *Earth Before* into a chain reaction. We would push the first domino, be the butterfly wings in America that cause a typhoon in Australia.

A painful analogy. America and Australia were scorched. Not one single, elegant butterfly remained.

We broke through barriers of space and time, focusing on the minds and energies in the shadows of *before* that flitted past our awareness. Our project rushed through the final stages, but not without incident. After we settled on finding a few receptive intellects, we were still so clumsy. We tread with extreme care. We remembered the problems of our first attempts. At first we made transient, mild interactions.

But what followed, *such disasters*. Like a bull in a china shop, we smashed and broke and cut ourselves and others in the process. The dangers to my consciousness were real. I spent a week in a coma when I entered into the wrong mind and was nearly consumed. It took the concerted efforts of the Reader ensemble to call me back again. With tenderness and pain, we increased our mastery. At last, I could visit and enter the past personalities, interact with them, and return with my health and sanity intact.

But the minds of those I reached!

My first serious contacts were still so crude. My skills in this work, and my knowledge and intuition of psychology, were rudimentary. Here I was, a seventeen-year-old girl whose life experiences consisted of the absurd tale you have read, trying to interface with psyches in human history that were as different and diverse from her own as could be imagined.

As with our visits to antiquity, many believed themselves insane when I spoke to them. Typically, these individuals twisted

and garbled my ideas. Others rejected them as voices, demons, or stray thoughts and never pursued our request. Some minds shattered with the impact. Our project left institutionalized wrecks behind—cognitive vegetables in place of once-whole persons.

I did this. *I* risked them, wrecked them, and fractured them again and again in my flailing efforts to find a way. Brain by ruined brain, I learned. I studied the subtleties of human thought, internal deliberation, inspirations, belief, and motivation. I grasped the fragility of a mind. How to discern when it was strong enough to absorb what I had to give it and when it was not.

As I perfected my skills, I mastered the art of directing these personalities toward the course I desired. After littering the past with the fragments of mangled minds, I learned to do so while leaving them unaware of my presence. I could even weave my existence into their consciousness in a manner that they could integrate into their reality. A fiction they entertained safely.

The time has come to finish what I left unexplained in the first chapters of this book. Now I must tie together what I have done and what I am trying to do. Now the tapestry is sewn.

Frothings of the fountain floated above the muttering leaves. An artificial breeze blew through the beeches. Water whispered, trees hushed, and the garden lay still before the monument to the Reader who had surrendered his life for our cause. I touched the grass on either side of me. I drank the fresh air, the echo of Earth through space and time.

Prayerful.

Chapter 50

The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrifies me.

Blaise Pascal

The fear of infinity is a form of myopia that destroys the possibility of seeing the actual infinite, even though it in its highest form has created and sustains us, and in its secondary transfinite forms occurs all around us and even inhabits our minds.

Georg Cantor

In the end, it was so iconic, so preposterous, the laughter burst from my mouth.

Don't get me wrong—nothing was more serious to me or any other human being on the moon. As I walked down the corridor to the new wing built by the Xixian crews, profound purpose weighed on me. To alter history. To achieve the impossible in space and time. To save my species. I could not have been more serious about anything.

But when Waythrel opened the door and I stepped in, gawking, the laughter erupted. Really, how could it not?

The area spanned a Brooklyn-sized chuck of lunar real estate. Power plants and equipment sprung like mushrooms across my field of vision. But that was the most expected aspect.

It was the ancient Greek amphitheater that startled me. Spiraling rows of curved benches ascended. Layers of a strange material rose from a central point, like a great satellite dish, together with seating arrangements for alien and human body types. At the focus of the room, over one hundred feet deep, carved into the lunar bedrock, was a chair.

And *hello there*, what a chair.

The Xix seemed to be aiming for the greatest stylistic contrast possible. The seat loomed as a chaotic composite of Xixian instrumentation. Wires, circuitry, and organic technology ran to and from the absurd throne.

And all of it? Pitch-black. A stunning opposition to the pure white of the material used to build the amphitheater. I didn't ask why.

Techs led me down to the focal point. Behind me trailed hundreds of Readers assuming their positions around the theater. I reached toward Waythrel with my mind for reassurance as they strapped me into the thing. I shivered, the process triggering nightmares of too many events in my life. The Sortax visit to Earth. The Dram examinations. The seats on the navslav ship. After all that had happened to me, those tortures felt both infinitely far and as close as my thumping heart.

I pitched a small fit about my Red Sox cap. They said it had to come off. Special sensors had to go on the Great Bald Patch. The ostrich egg-sized protrusion from my tumor in the back of my head must be bare. The hat would interfere. I growled and gave in. They stuck an outlandish helmet over my head. Ten thousand

cords seemed to run out of it and into the equipment. Boston's championship clothing I held in my lap.

I reclined. A seventeen-year-old, half-bald, freak of unnature, imprisoned in an obsidian cathedra at the focal point of a giant dish, sporting a floppy, dreadlocked mitre plugging her into a forest of monster's machinery. All this technological madness designed to amplify and focus gravitons from and to a titanic tumor in my pseudo-skull.

Helmet on head, hat clutched like a teddy in hands, my porcelain-white skin shone next to the ebony chair and dark robes I still wore. My flaming hair, grown long below the bulge, flowed halfway down my back. It emerged outward from the black bowl and wires, cascading over my shoulders and arms.

What I had come to—child of nearby charred Earth, spreading legend in a warring galaxy, centered in a seat of strange power of alien design. I'd traveled from my parents' farm, under knife, through space and torture and dungeons and violence. I had seen the universe as no one had ever encountered it. I had become blind and deformed. I'd eaten my own kind and murdered my planet. I'd opened and spoken with the Orb.

Wasn't it a little bit comical? Dark humor, at least?

Because as I joined with hundreds of Readers to form the astonishing, communal, spacetime-swimming consciousness, the greatest absurdity of all was that I was still alone. So alone, I still clung to the hat of a boy I knew only briefly before he died.

How could I let anyone near? I had no family. My species had betrayed me, mutilated me, and I had eaten them in return to stay alive. I had sacrificed billions so I might live, all to save aliens often so hideous I still shuddered when I looked at them. I was the Corrupted Messiah. The anti-Christ. The Alien Human. Always, to the end, the afterbirth of a cosmos gone very, very wrong.

This thing that is me waited at the bottom of a technological marvel of a hole. Group mind notwithstanding, I was its

homunculus, its center, and without me, it could not be. Bright orange and white me in a black chair. Ready to reach out to the universe through space and time and change history. If I could.

But as alone as I felt, I could not do this by myself. The final players had yet to appear. They must take hold of this dream, realize it, play their necessary part in swelling the ranks of our choir. The time had come for them to participate in the full picture.

It is now *your* time, Reader.

Epilogue

The future needed service, not pity, not piety; but in the past lay darkness, confusion, waste, and all the cramped primitive minds, bewildered, torturing one another in their stupidity, yet one and all in some unique manner, beautiful.

Olaf Stapledon

I have lived in the consciousness of this author for too long. It's taken *forever* to get him to write this story, to listen to me, to stop putting it off, to neglect his other duties and tell this impossible tale. I'm bone-tired of massaging his mentality, dealing with his personality quirks, his dreadful insecurity problems. But it is done.

After destroying myriad minds, after many mangled my meaning by spinning the threads of the narrative into books and films, glorious or ghastly, I found a brain that could survive my manipulations and record my account satisfactorily.

Of course, that is different from *accurately*. Looking over the words in this manuscript, I am aghast at the absurdities that have

crept into the telling. Distortions of ideas, events, alien worlds and beings, chronology. But the main message is here. The terrible loss of Earth. The power of Readers. The plan we have to save our planet. Here, for the first time, the tale, in essence, *is true*.

And this is the point. I could never reach enough of you in the past, one at a time. We required a medium to propagate the story. As it spread, many gifted with our talent would learn of our tragedy. If I could wield this writer of your time to compel belief, then perhaps, *just perhaps*, you might take that final step.

And you must.

You *must* remember! My life, my pain, my struggle, the terrible dungeon choking humanity, both in your time as slaves, and in mine, extinct. Please, I have never begged for anything like I am begging you now—*believe*.

It seems impossible. *Ridiculous*. The author himself does not entertain the mad notion that it is real. He ascribes these words in his head to creative regions of his brain. He does not accept the reality of *me*, of our future, of our urgency and so clings to his sanity.

But *you* must.

Let me rattle your cage, slave, and lay out before you the radical doubt of your mortal limitations. You who are the detritus of shattered stars. You, an angelic machine of blood and tissue, a transitory epiphenomenon of a timeless reality.

What are you?

I don't enjoy offending, but I think most of you need an earthquake to strike. Shake your spirit from the shackles that strap you to assumptions, habits, and deluded comforts of arrogance and certainty.

Your entire awareness is a brittle physiological state of a bag of meat lodged in a bone bowl. Billions of neurons, trillions of connections of biochemistry, fed electrochemical signals from fleshy detectors on the outside of the bowl, producing responses

sculpted from hundreds of millions of years of merciless selection of the better fit.

What *are* you?

I can sprinkle angel dust, fentanyl, psilocybin, or methamphetamine, and the sack of self becomes another bag entirely. What is *real* changes. Cause and effect mutate. MIT scientists once used magnets to change the electromagnetic fields in regions of the brain of test subjects. They altered their *moral* choices. You are one popped blood vessel away from a new personality. A distinct personhood.

So, *what* are you?

What is real? What do you know? The microwave in the kitchen is voodoo, or do you understand how cold things you put in are transmuted to hot? How a video can play across the screen? Can you do simple algebra, let alone the higher math and physics to have even the faintest idea how most of the technology around you functions?

"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

A quote from speculative fiction writer Arther C. Clarke. For ninety-nine percent of us, we are stumbling serfs surrounded by the magic of the gods. These divinities have shamans and priests and rabbis who tell us ghost stories about quantum mechanics and inverse square and wormholes and probability wave distributions. But we don't know what any of it means. We can't decipher the squiggling equations of the Technological Testament. We can't examine it because it is walled off in one thousand layers of Vatican-level code and we are the illiterate masses.

Do you believe the clerics of technology because they can perform miracles? Split the atom, clone your dog, heat your meat? If you can't interpret their spells and scriptures, what do you really know?

What are you?

I need to pulverize your preconceptions. You skim this now—an agent considering whether to publish this novel, some bored sci-fi fan with a free download on an e-reader, an imperious reviewer looking for a turn of phrase to drive the dagger of critique with salty cleverness—but you, in fact, know nothing. Nothing at all.

Arrogance blinds you to your blindness. Do you trust your eyes, those globs of gunk and blood? Or your wax-filled ears that would send your universe tumbling in a panic of vertigo should some crystals of calcium carbonate trickle past the hairs in the canals of the utricle and saccule? Tiny rocks dislodged to show you that your brain *invents* reality. Try arguing what is real as you vomit while the unspinning world spins. It's all in your head!

The madman is you. It is me. I am the most insane of all. I have a brand-new sensory organ to feed special stimulus to my flesh bag to paint pictures in my flickering biochemical awareness. And so I reach back to you now, through this book, written by this author.

And still, you won't believe.

Because such nonsense can't be true, can it? Because you know what reality is and what it is not. Your meat sack told you so. It helps you feel important and secure even as it *is* you, the you who can't even understand a microwave let alone the cosmos or *what you are*.

I would grab your bone bowl and shake and slap until you are as dizzy and confused and unsure as you should be. If you dare dismiss my story, my plea, if your egotism can't relinquish the crazed delusion that you actually know anything at all, if you can sit there reading with indifference, ignorant of almost everything around you, clueless about how your brain functions, unable to prove or establish even the most basic of propositions, you are lost.

Lost to us. Lost to humanity. Lost to yourself.

The young are deeply imprisoned. High on their physical and

mental vigor, too many can't see that they are hardly more than worms with adornments. Time crushes confidence as the body and mind fail in countless ways. The failures help open the soul to the possibility of weakness in other areas. What is the humbling lesson offered with age (or slavery, or abuse)? It's that you don't know shit.

Are you shaken or touched by my tale from your future? Then don't retreat to comfortable fantasies! Is that ironic? That a work of fiction demands you reject your reality and embrace its fancy? Or is the greater irony that you are convinced you can tell fact from fiction?

Take another step on this disorientating road with me. Begin to believe that I truly exist. That I am a voice, not of imagination, but of authenticity, as real as anything else you cannot demonstrate to be true. Know my person as you know your own heart.

Because only if you can free yourself from the chains of your confidence can you take my hand and walk with me. I'm leading you to a precipice. When you look down, holding onto me for dear sanity, you see not a chasm, but the vast universe itself at your feet. Swirling and evolving over billions of years. A gaping gullet of infinity gasping to swallow you whole.

So, jump.

Jump with me. Let go of your safety. Your surety. Your supposed knowledge. Let go and *fly*.

A few moments are sufficient. If you can bring your heart to a place of acceptance, you can channel that belief and beseech what is forthcoming. If you don't like "prayer," then meditate. Think deeply, concentrate. Your energies need to be channeled, you latent Readers.

It's rare for a book to beg you to believe its story. More strange to ask you to pray with conviction towards the future. *But you must*. Only if enough of you do so can our past provide us with the power to alter our collective destiny.

What will we change? What is the object of your meditation, the place you should focus all your thought? The Dram perturbed the orbit of a large asteroid and sent it plunging toward our home-world. You will seek to remake that event, to push that rock off the course the monsters had calculated.

Do so and it will miss Earth.

This is all we ask from you. A little shove, and the belief, the trust, to direct your thoughts to favor such a reality. The Xix will channel your energies to me. I will meld them into a force bridging time and space to impact momentum.

It doesn't matter when this happens. You could pray tonight, next month, three years from now. Others could participate in ten or twenty years. The threads of time need not spin from the same spool.

We will collect and weave them together, creating a stimulus to warp spacetime in front of a rushing rock. Your prayers can spare billions of lives. You can help give the human species, and all of life on Earth, another chance.

I despair to convince you. I must plead my case through the mind of another person who imperfectly transfers my words to print. Who himself has not lived through our time of terrible tragedy. How can I touch your heart so you will be moved?

Had you seen it all, experienced it, and stood before me in this instant, many of you would fall on your knees and pray we could be delivered from this nightmare. Just a single viewing of Earth, the charred and lava-stained mutilation alongside our moon, would forever change you.

But here, in the pages of this sterile book you can toss aside with no repercussions to you or your life—*how do I reach you*?

My life, my losses, my pains, my dreams, my hopes—you have walked with me through them to this point. You have shared in the wonder and horror of a universe existing right outside your ability to perceive.

Faith is the confidence in things not seen.

Belief reaches across the finite, limited powers of our senses and minds. It crosses the irreconcilable abyss between the doom of ignorance and the aspiration for truth.

If your heart has been moved by our pain and our love, what isn't seen is real to you. We exist as part of the awareness in your soul. You can *feel* me. If you do, and know within yourself who I am, I now ask you to *believe* me and take this final, crucial step.

If you cannot, all will be lost.

The story must spread for there to be any hope. We need you. This is my last attempt. There will be no more minds touched, no more stories, plays, or films inspired by my efforts.

The cold is creeping over me, entombing us all. One by one, we are falling into listlessness. Perhaps it is simply an understandable depression. But I feel otherwise. I recognize it deep within.

The withering of the branches.

We don't have the heart to continue. Our love binds us, but together we are ill. Our end comes.

Don't let us die. Don't allow Earth to fall into fire and final darkness. We have this grand Xixian machine set to receive.

Send to us, please.

Can it hurt you to reach out with faith, one time? Our cause is just. Our fate, terrible. Our need, more than desperate.

Reader, *dare to believe*. I am out of words. My story ends here. Our destiny is in your hands.

The last step in this journey—*is yours*.

This is not the end.
It is not even the beginning of the end.
But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning.

Winston Churchill, 1942

Afterward: Reader

Truth is a pathless land.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

When I began this series with Reader (then only conceived as a single novel), I wanted to write a "superheroine" book for my (then) middle school-aged daughters, the story of a "girl that saves the universe." What began as something with a strong YA flavor in the initial drafts, quickly turned darker. In addition, the ideas percolating in the first novel cried out for a follow-up. Hence, *Writer* and *Maker* were conceived.

With this trilogy, I was interested in exploring certain themes and ideas from a variety of science fiction authors and modern cosmology, trying to find my own "mythology" to harmonize some of the disparate conceptions of reality percolating through human discourse. Ideas surrounding the subjectivity and limitations of human perception and understanding played important roles, as did ideas of causality, time, superstructure, divinity, and infinity.

I always wanted to write a book that "broke the fourth wall" in

a significant manner and *Reader* was my chance to try. There has been a decidedly mixed reaction as to how well that worked, but it was a lot of fun in the making.

My creative activities have certainly tested the patience of many in my small circle of life. While such efforts are not necessarily to the taste of everyone, for those who have shown me grace and support, my heartfelt thanks are due and I gladly give it.

I am also touched by the readers and reviewers who have expressed such affection for one (and sometimes several!) of the novels of this trilogy, especially those who have responded with feelings and ideas that reflect in some deep way those elements within myself that engendered this series.

This tale was bigger than any one character, perspective, or voice; and while part of the divergence between novels was intentional to shake both the writer and the reader out of their comfort zone, the larger truth is that the voices of the characters came and spoke to me in the manner recorded, and I simply wrote down what they said.

I hope that in some other reality, their memory is eternal, and we might meet again.

Erec Stebbins

Acknowledgments

Love is not a reaction. If I love you because you love me, that is mere trade, a thing to be bought in the market.

Jiddu Krishnamurti

I would first like to thank Ambra, Nitin, and Waythrel, without whom these novels would not have existed. That they chose me as the writer to tell their impossible story is humbling and touching. I have done my best to tell it right, but know that I have failed in the ways they convey in the text. Forgive my limitations, my dear friends, and I hope we meet again outside my head.

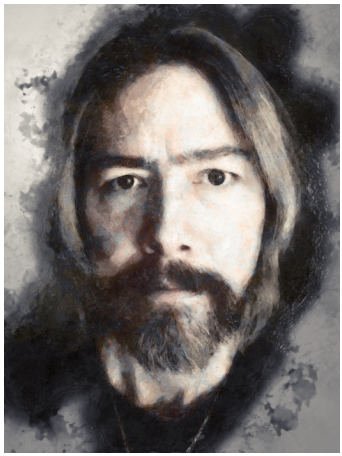
Thanks to those who supported the writing of the books during my self-publishing years. I had faint hope this odd narrative would interest many, and the failure of my first published thriller to sell convinced me (and publishers) that I was not marketable. During those years it was a struggle to put down the words that compose this trilogy. My deepest gratitude to those who instead provided encouragement.

And lastly, for those who are not with me, your love, your dreams, and your spirit will always be. If not in this life, or this world, perhaps in others, amongst other stars and innumerable galaxies, in universes uncounted and reborn.

Forever I remain, a stargazer.

Erec Stebbins, December 2025

About the Author



Erec Stebbins, 2022

Erec Stebbins is a biomedical researcher who writes thrillers and science fiction. He was born in the Midwest, his mother a clinical psychologist and his father a professor of Romance languages. His father's specialty is the source of the unusual spelling of his middle name, taken from knight in an Arthurian romance: *Érec et Énide*.

He has pursued diverse interests over the course of his life, including science, music, drama, and writing. His academic path focused on science, and he received a degree in physics from Oberlin College in 1992, and a PhD in biochemistry from Cornell University in 1999. He has worked for several decades studying the structure of biological macromolecules involved in disease.